LET POLLY DO IT

BY

AMY WENTWORTH STONE



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LET POLLY DO IT

By AMY WENTWORTH STONE

P–PENNY AND HIS LITTLE RED CART

HERE'S JUGGINS

TREASURE FOR DEBBY

LET POLLY DO IT



Polly knelt down among the crowding kittens.

Let Polly Do It

AMY WENTWORTH STONE

Illustrated by

MARGARET AYER

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To

SEYMOUR H. STONE

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Chapter One

UNDER WAY

"POLLY," said Miss Henrietta Stebbins, standing at the top of the steps under the portico, "do you have to stay right out there in front? Couldn't you clean that disreputable old car just as well somewhere at the back of the house?"

Polly Stebbins stepped around from the other side of the Ford. She wore a working blouse and slacks and a jaunty cap on her boyish bob, and she held a paint pot in her hand.

"I'm almost through, Aunt Retta," she called. "Don't come too near the edge of the steps, will you?"

Ever since Miss Henrietta had broken her hip last spring, Polly and Aunt Nell had been in constant terror lest she fall again, for Miss Henrietta had al-

ways been active and independent, and never inclined to accept help. She was still stately, even on crutches, thought Polly, looking up at the tall, aristocratic figure under the portico.

Miss Henrietta, on her part, eyed the slacks and the dingy Ford dubiously from the top of the steps. Nobody in the world but Polly could have made Miss Henrietta tolerate such things for a moment in front of the dignified old Stebbins mansion, but Polly, ever since the day nine years ago when she and her sister Debby had come to Bellport to live with their great-aunts, had always known how to wheedle Aunt Retta.

"Has the mail come?" said Miss Henrietta, disregarding the slacks for the time being.

"No, Aunt Retta," said Polly, "I'll bring it in when it does."

As soon as she saw that Miss Henrietta was safely through the screen door again, Polly went around to the other side of the Ford, and recommenced touching up the rusty spots with the black paint. It really *was* a disreputable vehicle, admitted Polly to herself, but then, it had cost only ten dollars and it would serve her purpose nicely. She had already made five dollars since she bought it, and now she was going to enlarge her business. It was time, by the way, that Zab Eaton brought back those cards which he was printing for her. Polly looked up from her work long enough to glance in the direction of the Eatons' house, which stood just beyond the Steb-

bins mansion. Zab, however, was nowhere to be seen. Then she heard approaching footsteps on the sidewalk behind her and turned quickly. It was not Zab, however, but her tall cousin, George Jones, who was coming up the hill from the little town, very gay and debonair in faultless yachting clothes.

"Well, whatever blew you in here again?" called Polly cheerfully. "I thought you were at Bar Harbor by this time."

"I've been becalmed up the coast," said George, "but there's a spanking breeze now, and I thought I'd just run back for a day. Want to go sailing?"

Polly, paint pot still in hand, regarded her handsome cousin. George *did* have a wonderful eighteen-footer.

"No," she said, after a moment's consideration, "I can't. I've got too much to do." And she turned to the Ford again and resumed her painting.

"But look here, Polly," said George earnestly, "I came all the way back from Rockland just to take you out."

"Thanks a lot," replied Polly promptly. "You always were a goose. Besides, I told Ned Abbott I couldn't go out in his motorboat today, and he might see us." And she looked up long enough to grin at her cousin.

"Is that dumbbell hanging around again?" said George, frowning a little.

"Yes," replied Polly indifferently.

Polly's indifference was part of her charm, thought George, looking at his cousin. She certainly was not pretty, as Debby had been when *she* was seventeen. In the first place, Polly was too thin, including her face, with its ridiculous tip-tilted nose. Then her eyes were almost too black and sharp for comfort. What the deuce was it that made her so irresistible? Her teeth were fine, to be sure, when she smiled that funny little crooked smile of hers. Perhaps it was the smile, which was unlike any other that George had ever seen, and her zest for a good time with anybody —anybody, that was, who was not sentimental! Polly never *would* be sentimental.

"Oh, by the way," she said, looking up suddenly from the Ford, "I almost forgot—I have that five dollars for you."

"*I* don't want the five dollars back," asserted George at once.

"Well, you're going to get it," retorted Polly. "I'm awfully obliged for the loan, though. I couldn't have paid the whole amount down on the Ford without it. But I've sold two kittens, and now I have the cash. Come on in and I'll give it to you." And she put down the paint pot, and walked around the Ford to the gate.

"But I say," protested George, making no move to follow Polly, "I don't want that money. I think it's bully of you to start in to——"

"Sh!" said Polly, looking quickly behind her. "You're not to breathe a word of that aloud, you know. I'm sorry now that I let you in on it. Nobody is to know a thing about it until next fall."

"All right," said George, "I'm mum. But all the same I——"

"If you're so interested in the business, come on in and see the kittens," said Polly, holding open the gate. And quite against his will, George followed Polly up the walk and into the house.

No one, not even the happy-go-lucky George, ever came into the Stebbins mansion without feeling a sense of its beauty and dignity. The Sheratons and Heppelwhites and Chippendales that filled the high-studded old rooms, the treasures on wall and shelf and cabinet, that long ago had come straight from the Orient in Great-grandfather Stebbins' clipper ship—all contributed to make the Stebbins mansion seem, what in truth it was, the most stately and rich of all the fine old houses of Bellport.

But today George, as he followed Polly into the hall, gave slight attention to the beauties of the house. He was hoping that he should not meet Aunt Retta. Aunt Retta had a way of admonishing George whenever she saw him, and George had been thoroughly admonished less than a week ago. He glanced a little nervously into the drawing-room as they went by, but the only face to be seen was that of beautiful

Great-grandmother Stebbins in the portrait over the mantel, who had for so many years looked down on the old room and filled it with a lovely presence. Rarely did one of her descendants go by the door of the drawing-room without glancing in for a moment at Great-grandmother.

Polly, however, looked neither to the right nor the left as she led the way through the hall and the big empty kitchen to the shed, stopping only long enough to pick up a pan of milk from the kitchen table.

"I have quite a lot of them," she said, opening the door, "and I know where I can get three more."

"Great guns!" said George, for as soon as they stepped into the shed a whirlwind of fluffy kittens came rushing from every direction, their fuzzy little pointed tails sticking straight up in the air. Polly, it seemed, was also irresistible to cats. Putting the pan of milk on the floor, she knelt down among the crowding kittens, helping the smaller ones to find a place at the edge, and restraining the greedy from getting into the pan.

"I never could have collected so many without the Ford," said Polly, regarding them with satisfaction. "There are heaps of tourists around this summer. I shall put a sign on the front gate, saying *Angora Kittens for Sale.*"

"What about Aunt Retta?" suggested George, doubtfully.

"Oh, I'll manage her," Polly answered easily.

"Besides, I don't see how you'll make enough money to amount to much, even if you sell all the cats," said George.

"I'm going to do other things too, Wet Blanket," Polly was crushing. "All the things in Bellport that people hate to do for themselves."

"What do you mean?" George asked.

"Oh, everybody has something to do that gives them the fidgets. But I shan't mind it if they'll pay me."

"For instance?" George insisted.

"Well," Polly explained, "old Mrs. Brown out on the Thomaston road has a big bagful of worsted that she needs to have untangled. And Alice Crane has to play cribbage every day with her grandfather and let him beat, and she gets awfully tired of it."

While she was speaking Polly had walked across the shed, and taken down a broken bean-pot from a dusty shelf. Out of it she drew a five dollar bill.

"Do you keep your cash lying around loose like that for anybody to pick up?" said George.

"Nobody would ever look for money in a shed, and it says 'EXPLOSIVE' on it." Polly turned the bean-pot around, so that George could see the label, as she put it back on the shelf. "Besides," she added, her black eyes on her cousin, "it's better to keep money *any*where than to spend every cent you've got on yachting caps and flannels. Come, take your five dollars, Good-for-Nothing. I'm awfully obliged,

but you'll need it yourself before long." Then, as George still hesitated, "If you don't, I shall call Aunt Retta, and tell her you are here!"

It certainly beat the Dutch, thought George, as he reluctantly put the bill in his pocket, how Polly always guessed just what was in your mind.

"Come on," she said, pushing away the kittens, who had finished the milk and wanted to follow her. And she opened the door just wide enough for George and herself to slip through.

"What's that?" asked George, as they stepped from the kitchen into the hall.

Polly grinned. There was the unmistakable sound of crutches upon the stair, and in a moment Miss Henrietta came around the newel post, attended by little Aunt Nell, who never allowed her sister to go up and down stairs alone.

"Why, George!" said Aunt Retta, standing still in the hall, and looking in astonishment from under her level brows. "Where did you come from? We thought you were on the way to Frenchman's Bay." Then she turned toward the drawing-room, with Aunt Nell still at her side. "Come in here," she admonished George, "I want to talk to you."

George looked around at Polly with a wry face over his shoulder, as he followed his aunts through the drawing-room door, and beckoned to her with pleading finger behind his back. But Polly only laughed.

"I've got too much to do, Georgy-Porgy," she said. "See you later."

Once outside, Polly stood for a moment under the portico, and looked across at the Eatons'. She fancied that she had caught sight of Zab's blue overalls disappearing into the garage. Poor Zab, he had certainly had a stroke of ill luck, and Polly was genuinely sorry for her old playmate. He had wanted so much to go to the agricultural school, and had tried so hard for that scholarship. Polly could not get out of her mind how his funny freckled face had looked last week when he told her that he had missed out on the scholarship. He did not say that he would have to give up going to the school, but Polly had guessed it, for she knew that the Eatons had recently lost a good deal of money. She caught her breath a little as she thought of how *she* would feel if she had to give up her plans for the fall. Whatever would she do, if she found that she could not go to college in September! Polly had graduated from the Academy in June, and was looking forward to college, and the chance to get out into the world, with an almost fierce desire. It seemed to her that she could hardly wait for the fall to come, and the great adventure to begin. Life at the Stebbins mansion with the aunts was not zestful, and Polly was without question, full of zest.

As she stood under the portico, looking off through the elms over the little town below, with the familiar

river and woods and meadows beyond, all the quiet beauty of the scene was lost upon Polly, and she wished for a moment that she could throw a stone at the view and smash it. What would she not give to be Debby—away from it all, in Florence, Naples, Rome? Debby—it always made Polly a bit wistful to think of her sister, for the warmest place in Polly's heart was still kept for Debby, although it was four years since she and Eric had been married and had sailed away, to the work which had kept Eric so closely in Italy. More than once they had hoped and planned to come back for a visit, but always something had interfered, and now, with little Eleanor, traveling was even more of a problem. But at last they were really coming home for a whole winter at the Stebbins mansion, where Eric would do some writing, and Debby would keep Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell company while Polly went away to college. It might even be a little hard to go, when the time came, thought Polly, if Debby were there. But Sanbornville was only thirty miles away and there would be week-ends.

They were looking daily now for the letter that should tell the date of sailing. How good it would be not to have to depend upon letters any more! For months writing to Debby had been difficult, because there was so much that could not be mentioned, for Aunt Retta had decided that, since Debby was

so soon to come home, it would be best not to worry her about the broken hip, or the doctor's warning to Aunt Nell that she must go up and down the long stairs as little as possible. Sometimes her aunts seemed to her so frail that Polly was a little frightened, but Debby would be here in a few weeks, and then at last they could talk it all over.

Polly's rare mood of thought was interrupted by the reappearance of the blue overalls at the door of the Eatons' garage. She whistled the particular call which she and Zab had used ever since they were children, and the figure in the overalls turned at once, and with a wave of the hand came loping across the lawn, taking the low hedge at a bound. For nine years, ever since Polly had first come to Bellport to live, Zab had seldom failed to respond faithfully to that whistle, or to do Polly's bidding, whatever it might be. She walked slowly down the path, and by the time she reached the car, Zab was there before her, lanky and awkward, his red hair erect and rumpled, his freckled face moist with his hurry.

"Have you done the cards?" demanded Polly at once.

"Yes," said Zab, putting his hand in the large pocket of his overalls, "I was just coming over with them." And he handed Polly a thick package, bound with an elastic.

She ran a critical eye down the card.

LET POLLY DO IT

Does it make you weep to peel your onions
for dinner?
Let Polly do it! ---------- for 10¢.
Do you like to see your dog all clean and
fluffy?
Let Polly do it! ---------- for a quarter
Does your child have to go to the dentist?
Let Polly do it! ---------- for half a dollar

When she had read to the bottom of the card Polly looked up and smiled.

"That's great, Zabbie," she said. "You're a good printer. Thanks a lot." And Zab, for whom Polly's praise was rare, beamed all over his round red face. "The next time you go down to the village," she added, handing back half the cards, "would you mind just getting them put around in the drug store and the Souvenir Shoppe and the market, or anywhere else where people will see them, you know." Then Polly picked up her paint brush again, and went to work on the Ford.

"What are you going to do with all the money you earn?" enquired Zab, watching her, anxious, as always, to prolong their interview.

"Oh, take care of my old age," said Polly, with a laugh.

"You won't have to do that, Polly," said Zab

looking seriously at her, "for we shall be married, and *I* shall be taking care of you."

"Don't be a blithering idiot!" said Polly, without lifting her eyes from her paint brush.

"But we *are* going to be married sometime, you know, Polly," went on Zab earnestly.

Polly finished the particular spot on which she was working. Then she glanced up carelessly.

"Look in the box, will you, like a good child," she said, flourishing her brush toward the gate, "and see if there's any mail."

"No, there isn't," said Zab, dropping the cover of the mail box with a bang. "And I wish, Polly, you wouldn't call me that any more."

"Well, don't act like one then," retorted Polly.

Just then the screen door opened, and George appeared, running down the steps like a boy let out of school. He scowled a little at Zab, with a brief *hello;* then he turned to Polly.

"Got off easy this time," he said, glancing back at the drawing-room window. Then, observing the car, "I say, that begins to look flossie," he added.

"Yes," agreed Polly, squinting at it, her head on one side. Then she grinned. "Good for you, Georgy-Porgy," she said. "*Flossie Ford*—that's it!"

And they both laughed, while Zab still stood awkwardly by.

Polly looked up through the tree tops, where puffy white clouds were sailing over on a fresh west wind.

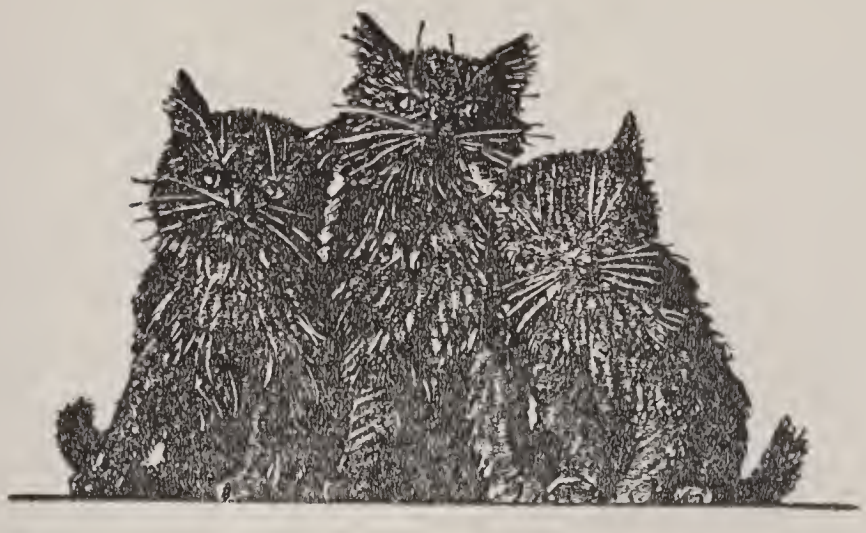
It really *was* a beautiful day, and the eighteen-footer was a dream in a west wind.

"I'll go out with you for an hour, Georgy-Porgy," she announced. "Want to come too, Zabbie?" she added, her black eyes full of mischief, as she saw George's expression.

"I can't," said Zab doggedly. "I've got to go to Rockland with Mother."

"Oh," said Polly cheerfully, "then you can stop at the dairy farm and get those kittens on the way back. Mrs. Daggett said I could have them today. Hop in, Georgy. We'll go down in Flossie. Just put my sweater on the back seat." And hastily wiping her hands on the paint rag, Polly slid in behind the wheel, and started the engine. "Oh, goodness, there's the paint pot!" she exclaimed, "Aunt Retta'll have a fit. Zab," she called, leaning from the window, as the car started with a jerk, "just put the paint away for me, will you, there's a good—boy. And don't forget the kittens."

Then Flossie Ford rattled off down the hill under the elms.



Chapter Two

BUSINESS BOOMS

POLLY, paint brush in hand, stood before Debby's old easel, which she had set out upon the grass behind the shed, and regarded her work. On the easel was a large sign-board, with a white background, on which Polly was carefully filling in, in black, the letters which had been outlined in pencil. Presently she stepped back and squinted for a moment at the sign. Then, with a shake of her boyish bob and a hitch to her white slacks, she went diligently to work again on the last letter. She had almost finished it when her eye was caught by something over the top of the sign, and she stopped long enough to wave.

"Hello, Zabbie," she called to the figure which at that moment emerged from the Eatons' garage, wheeling a lawn-mower. "Don't begin to cut the grass now. I shall want you to help me in a few minutes."

At the sound of Polly's voice, Zab at once dropped

the handle of the lawn-mower, and came across into the Stebbins' yard.

"Gee-whiz, Polly," he said, standing beside her, and looking at the sign, "you've done a dandy job. But I don't see how you can put that on the gate."

"It's not going on the gate, stupid," said Polly, giving a final touch to the *E*. "It's going on a tree up the road. I decided that would be simpler."

"Oh," said Zab, re-reading the sign.

SLOW DOWN!
YOU ARE APPROACHING
POLLY'S CATS
and
THE FAMOUS OLD STEBBINS MANSION
STOP—LOOK—COME IN!
TAKE HOME THE FLUFFIEST KITTEN IN MAINE!

"Won't your aunt make a fuss about it?" said Zab, who stood in awe of Polly's relations, especially Miss Henrietta.

"No," said Polly. "She will be spared, by not seeing it. Do you mind carrying the sign out to Flossie, while I get the hammer and nails? We'll put it up right away. Hold it away from you now—yes, like that—and be careful not to smooch it when you set it in the car. I'll be there in a minute." And Polly vanished into the shed.

Zab, carrying the sign awkwardly in front of him, strode along the side of the Stebbins mansion toward the front gate. Out of the corner of his eye, he was sure that he saw an aunt sitting by the window of the south parlor sewing, but whichever it was, she fortunately did not look up, and Zab and the sign reached Flossie Ford in safety. A moment later they were joined by Polly, carrying a small step-ladder, as well as the hammer and nails. She had stopped long enough to put a canvas hat on the boyish bob and a gay kerchief at the neck of her white blouse, and Zab thought that he had never seen her look so jaunty and delightful. She tied the ladder to the running board, and slid in beside Zab.

"We'll just go up to the big oak," said Polly, "and you can nail the sign there."

The ride was all too short for Zab, who was not often taken out in Flossie. In less than five minutes Polly had drawn the car to the side of the road by the big oak, and Zab was standing on the top of the ladder, hammering the sign to the tree, while Polly handed up the nails.

"It looks very well," she said, regarding it critically, as Zab descended from the ladder. "Thanks, Zabbie."

"Let's go for a ride," suggested Zab, as they got back into the car.

"No," said Polly, backing Flossie around, "I haven't time."

"Oh, but Polly," protested Zab, "we haven't been anywhere for a long time."

"I can't today," said Polly, with decision. "I've got to go and fix Mrs. Robinson's liver. They always have it on Thursday. Besides, you've got to mow the lawn." And in another minute Polly had drawn Flossie up by the Eatons' gate, and was waiting for Zab to get out. "And *would* you mind, Zabbie, putting the ladder away in the shed? You *are* rather a nice boy," she added, smiling at him, as he obediently untied the ladder.

"When are you coming back?" he said, stirred by the smile. "It's awfully dull around here when you're away, Polly." And he looked at her with disconcerting earnestness.

"Oh, I don't know," said Polly indifferently, starting the engine again. Something would have to be done about Zabbie. He was getting altogether too sentimental. Nevertheless, she waved her hand out of the window without looking around, as she slid off down the hill.

In a moment she had dismissed him from her mind, and had begun to think about cats, counting up the kittens that had already been promised to her, and busily figuring out how many slats it would take to make the little crates when they had to be shipped. It was not until, the liver having been prepared, she walked out of the Robinsons' gate again, with a quarter in her pocket, and opened the door of Flossie,

that she thought about Zab again. Poor Zabbie, should she go back and get him and take him for a ride? There was still time before supper to go out on the Bascom Bay road, and see if the kittens at the red farmhouse were really worth collecting. No, Polly decided, she would *not* take Zab. In his present frame of mind, he would have to be snubbed. And before the end of the afternoon she was, indeed, glad of her decision.

In another minute she had turned the car, and was rattling along the road to Bascom Bay. It was the end of a clear, beautiful June day, and Polly sniffed the sweetness of the summer afternoon through the open window with real delight. As a rule her busy, practical mind gave little attention to natural beauty. But it *was* a lovely country, thought Polly, looking off from the top of the hill across the rolling green fields, and the pastures pink with wild roses. Far away beyond them, and the distant line of dark little spruces, she could just see a narrow blue strip of open ocean. Somewhere out there on that blue were George and the eighteen-footer. Oh, but it must be fun to be able to sail away and away, without any thought of coming back!

Well, in a little over two months she, too, would be off to freedom and adventure—not very far, to be sure, but away from Bellport anyway. Polly drew a long breath and stepped on the accelerator, so that the old car fairly flew to the top of the next

hill. Straight ahead was the red farmhouse, but Polly suddenly stopped the car and looked off to the right, where the silo and dairy barns of the Daggett farm gleamed in the sunny field. A girl in a bright red dress was running like mad across a distant pasture, pursued by a cow. Polly watched with interest. It must be that foolish Ethel Daggett, who had just come to live with her uncle, and she probably thought it was a bull. Polly grinned, and, seeing that the girl was safely over the fence, started Flossie again.

The kittens at the red farmhouse proved adorable. In less than ten minutes Polly had made a brisk negotiation for them with the woman in the kitchen, and was carrying them off down the walk, a bunch of golden yellow under each arm, to the car.

"Don't forget to let me know if you have some more in the fall," she called back, as she slammed the door of Flossie on the kittens. And the woman, standing with her hands folded under her apron, and looking at the retreating slacks, said to herself that that was a smart and pleasant young one, in spite of her outlandish rig.

As she drove off down the road toward home, Polly thought that she had never in her life seen such lively and investigating kittens. They did not seem in the least frightened by this amazing break in their quiet kittenhood. They clambered all over the car, pressing their little wet noses against the windows, jump-

ing from the cushions to the top of the seat, and from there to Polly's shoulders. Finally one of them jumped up on the wheel. Polly, laughing, stopped the car for a moment, in order to drop them both into the back again. As she did so, she noticed another car just ahead, stalled by the roadside. It was a very neat Chevrolet runabout, and a nice looking young man was standing beside it, anxiously examining its inner workings. Without a moment's hesitation, Polly opened the door of Flossie and jumped out.

"Are you having engine trouble?" she enquired, walking toward the Chevrolet. "Can I help?"

The young man glanced up in surprise. But his eyes were instantly fastened on something behind Polly.

"Hi, there!" he called. "Look out for your cats!"

Polly swung around, and there, to be sure, were her precious kittens, just on the point of jumping from the running-board to the road. She had failed to close the door.

"Oh, dash it all!" said Polly, lunging after the kittens.

But they were too quick for her, and in a moment their fluffy little tails were vanishing under the snake fence by the side of the road, into the field beyond. In a flash Polly was through the fence, with the kittens already far ahead of her, frisking away over the green, in evident joy that life had really begun at

last. The young man, meanwhile, had come through the fence farther along the road.

"Circle around behind them," he shouted to Polly, "and I'll try to head them off. But don't let them get into that patch of corn, or we're lost."

Then began an absorbing game around the field. Polly and the young man dodged back and forth on different sides of the kittens, coaxing and shooing and vainly clutching, but always just before the four hands came within grasping distance, away went the two fluffy little yellow balls again, capering in opposite directions among the buttercups, and the process had to be begun all over.

It was in a tangle of raspberry bushes by the fence that the runaways were finally cornered, Polly crawling in on one side, and the young man on the other. A moment later they were confronting one another, laughing and dishevelled, each with a struggling kitten, and Polly had her first really good look at the young man. She found him very pleasant indeed, although there was, at first sight, nothing especially distinctive about him. He was neither very tall nor very short, very dark nor very fair, but he looked back at Polly with an easy friendliness, as if they had known each other for a long time. It was not until they had put the kittens safely back into the Ford and he turned to her again, that she noticed the whimsical eyes under his rather thick brows. They

were different from any eyes that Polly had seen in other young men, and she was not at all sure whether they looked at her with interest, or merely with amusement.

"Thanks a lot," said Polly, with her engaging smile. "If your car's out of commission, don't you want me to tow you to a garage?"

"Would you?" said the young man, almost without looking at Polly and the smile. "I'd be most awfully obliged. I'll get the rope in my car."

Between them they tied the two cars together, he accepting her help quite as if they had been motoring for months.

"I'll ride in my own car," he said, when at last they were ready, "so that I can keep a hand on the wheel."

Polly, starting Flossie's engine, thought that she had never seen so detached a young man. Once, as they rumbled along toward town, she looked back to make sure that the Chevrolet was following properly. The young man was leaning back behind his wheel, with a wide and appreciative smile upon his face, but he was not smiling at Polly. He was looking at the back of the Ford, where the words LET POLLY DO IT were painted in large white letters. Just before they rumbled into Bellport they passed a motorcycle chugging up the hill. On it was a lad who, as he flew by, turned his head, to his utter peril, to stare back at Polly and her tow. It was

Ned Abbott, and she had told him earlier in the afternoon that she was too busy to go out in his motor-boat!

When Polly had brought her tow safely to the garage on lower Main Street, and the Chevrolet had been looked over, it was found that the car would have to be left until the next day.

"Do you live far away?" asked Polly, turning to the young man, who stood beside her, regarding the Chevrolet somewhat disconsolately.

"No," he said, "I'm spending the summer over there on West Hill." And as he spoke, he waved his hand toward the opposite side of the street, where through the upper branches of the elms a small white house could just be discerned, gleaming in the late sunshine on a distant slope. "It *does* seem about time for introductions," he added, feeling about rather casually in the pockets of his jacket. "I don't seem to have any cards with me, but my name is Randall Gage, and Mother and I have the Bixby cottage."

"I saw somebody moving in there last week," said Polly, whom nothing ever escaped. "My name is Polly—Polly Stebbins."

"Oh, yes," said Randall Gage, apparently still more intent on the Chevrolet than on her, "I judged so from the back of your car. What, exactly, *do* you do?" he added, looking at her suddenly.

"I take stranded people home, for one thing!" laughed Polly, turning toward Flossie Ford. "Come

on, get in, and I'll run you over to Bixby's. And more than that," she added, as Randall seemed for some reason to hesitate, "if you object to riding with strangers, *I can* identify myself!" And as she slid in behind her wheel, Polly put her hand into the pocket of her slacks, and pulled out one of the "Let Polly Do It" cards, which she handed to Randall Gage.

Out of the corner of her eye, as they rolled along into the country again, Polly could see him, in the seat beside her, reading the card, with that funny detached expression on his face, but he made no comment until he came to the end.

"Comprehensive list," he remarked then, still looking at the card. "About everything except catching frogs for people."

"Do *you* want frogs?" said Polly, glancing at him with interest.

"Sometimes," he said.

"To eat?" she asked.

"No," he replied, "to dissect."

"Oh?" said Polly, more interested than ever. "What for?"

"Just for practice," said Randall Gage. "I happen to work in the biological laboratory at Sanborn College in the winter."

"Sanborn College!" exclaimed Polly, while Flossie gave a little jump. "Why, that's where I am going this fall."

"Oh, are you?" said Randall, pleasantly, but curiously without interest.

Polly was silent for a moment. She had never met any young man quite like this before.

"Do you want me to catch some frogs for you?" she said. "I used to be rather good at it," and she grinned as her mind went back to one or two of her frog episodes with Aunt Retta.

"That would be nice of you," said Randall, reflectively. Then suddenly he turned to Polly, as if he were only just fully aware of her. "But see here," he said, "if you are really hunting for something disagreeable to do, what about coming now and then and looking after Philip and Alexander for an afternoon?"

"*Who* are Philip and Alexander?" laughed Polly.

"They are my small twin nephews," replied Randall fervently, shaken for a moment out of his indifference, "and, believe *me*, they are holy terrors. I *told* Mother they'd be too much for her, but she *would* bring them up here. We've had the Daggett girl looking out for them for a week, but she can't do anything with them."

"No," said Polly, remembering Ethel and the cow, "she wouldn't."

"They prefer me and the dissecting to Ethel, and there's simply no getting away from them, or accomplishing anything," said Randall, quite as if he were confessing his troubles to an old and tried friend.

"I'll come and look after them," said Polly simply.

"You will?" said Randall, turning to her with enthusiasm for the first time. "When?"

"To-morrow," said Polly.

"There are two of them, you know," said Randall, "and each is worse than the other."

"I shan't mind them," said Polly, who had never yet had any difficulty with any male creature.

"By George, I don't believe you will," said Randall, regarding Polly with a friendly, matter-of-course sort of grin, as she drew Flossie Ford up in front of the Bixby cottage. "Won't you come in and meet my mother?"

Polly cast a hasty glance at her grass-stained slacks.

"No," she said, "I'll see her to-morrow. Thanks again for helping catch the kittens."

"Thank *you* for giving me a lift," said Randall, getting out of the car, and touching his cap to Polly. "See you to-morrow then—somewhere around two?"

"Yes," said Polly, bringing her hand to her forehead in mock salute.

Then she quickly backed Flossie around, and started off, with the customary jerk, toward home. She turned for a moment, to see if Randall were looking after her, but he was walking swiftly up the path with his eyes on the ground, and he did not so much as glance over his shoulder at the departing Flossie. Polly pretended to herself that she had only turned to look at the kittens, who had gone to sleep at last

in a little golden heap on the back seat. Then she faced her road again, and tossed back her straight black hair, which the wind had blown over her face. He might just have looked around once, thought Polly. Nevertheless, he was the nicest man she had ever met—so easy and comfortable, without a *bit* of nonsense. You couldn't even tell whether he liked you or not, but you felt at once that you had known him for a long time. She did hope that he would be there when she went to-morrow to look after those twins. Suddenly Polly remembered that she had never thought to ask what they paid for that job. She bit her lip as she reflected that Randall Gage was very likely smiling to himself at this moment as he thought of how un-businesslike she was. Well, it would be something, anyhow, to add to her bank account, which was growing all too slowly. There was only a little over two months before— Polly impetuously stepped on the gas, and brought Flossie up the Stebbins hill with every bolt rattling. And there at the top was Zab, oiling his lawn mower by the Eatons' gate. Zabbie! Why, it seemed ages since she had left him at that job.

Goodness! What a mercy it was that she hadn't taken him along this afternoon!

Chapter Three

A CONQUEST

"You are far too inclined, Polly," said Miss Henrietta, sitting very straight behind the silver coffee urn at the breakfast table, "to take up with strangers. I have told you more than once that it has never been the custom of the Stebbins' to make acquaintances without an introduction."

"But his car had broken down, Aunt Retta," protested Polly, looking up from her cereal with eyes unusually bright and sharp, "and he was a mile from a garage. Besides, there was nobody there to introduce us—except the precious kittens, and I will say that they did their level best!" And Polly smiled to herself at the remembrance.

"I repeat," said Aunt Retta, and her voice was firmer than ever, "I repeat that I have never liked, and I never shall like, pick-me-ups, from nobody knows where."

"Eric was a pick-me-up-from-nobody-knows-where," said Polly, her black eyes full of mischief.

She knew perfectly that in Aunt Retta's estimation Debby's husband could do no wrong.

"Eric is an entirely different matter," said Aunt Retta stiffly. "Debby met him in our own house, where he had come for perfectly good reasons."

"He just walked in, though, without an introduction," maintained Polly, demurely finishing her cereal.

"I don't like this disposition to argue everything, Polly, and it seems to me that it is growing on you," said Aunt Retta. "All I want you to understand is that I don't care to have you going to the Bixby cottage until we know something about these people who have moved in there."

"I should hardly suppose," said Aunt Nell, who had come in from the kitchen with a plate of toast during the conversation, "that Mrs. Bixby would have rented the cottage to any one who was undesirable. Perhaps Dr. Hill will know about them. I shall see him this morning when I go down to the village, and I will make enquiries. Did you say the name was *Gage,* Polly?"

"Yes," said Polly, "and, if you like, I'll ask Miss Stanhope at the Academy, when I go up with the books. You and I both know, Aunt Retta, that if Miss Stanhope has no criticism of people they must be ripe for heaven!" And Polly grinned with good humor across the table at the coffee urn. Polly was perennially good-humored, and she always had known how to disarm Aunt Retta.

"Well," said Miss Henrietta, in a voice somewhat less firm, "we'll see. But if you *do* go, Polly," she added, reaching for her crutches, "I want it understood that you are to wear a *dress*—not any of these *trousers.*"

"I'll let you look me over before I start, Aunt Retta," laughed Polly, well aware that her point was won.

It was a more than usually gay Polly who drove down the hill that morning, to carry Aunt Nell and the market basket to the village, and the books to the Academy, and it was a still more cheerful one who rattled back up to the Stebbins mansion an hour later. For both old Dr. Hill and Miss Stanhope had spoken in the highest terms of the Gages. As she went through the hall toward the kitchen with the laden market basket, Polly looked in for a moment at the door of the south parlor, where Miss Henrietta was sitting in the wing-chair, behind the morning paper.

"Oh, Aunt Retta," said Polly, her dark eyes more mischievous than ever, "Miss Stanhope does know about the Gages, and she says that the step-sister of some relative of Mrs. Gage married a connection of old Cousin Jonathan's first wife—or the wife of some relative married Cousin Jonathan's step-sister, or—well, anyhow, the Gages are sort of Stebbins cousins, you see!"

There was an ominous pause, during which the newspaper rustled slightly.

"I hope that you will see, Polly, that Aunt Nell does not have to get lunch," said Miss Henrietta after a moment, a little severely, though her face was still concealed by the paper. "I think she does not feel quite like herself."

"Yes, I'll get it," said Polly cheerfully, as she moved off down the hall with the market basket. As she opened the kitchen door, she smiled her funny little crooked smile, for she knew very well that nobody except herself ever took such liberties with Aunt Retta with impunity.

As soon as lunch was over and cleared away, Polly went up to her room to array herself for the afternoon. She dressed with care in a brown frock, piped with red, that Ned Abbott had told her made her look "as jolly as the deuce." She tried in vain to arrange her perverse bob to suit her, and finally in despair ran her fingers through it, and shook it back as usual from her face, covering it with a little brown cap that had once belonged to Debby. If only there were a face like Debby's under it, thought Polly ruefully. Debby was always, for Polly, the prettiest person in the world. She took a final glance into the mirror and ran quickly into the hall and down the stairs.

"How about it, Aunt Retta?" she said gaily, standing, with her hands behind her, in the doorway of the drawing-room. "Do I pass muster?"

Miss Henrietta looked up from the old secretary where she was writing, and surveyed her niece critically from under her level brows.

"You will do," she said, "if you will keep your hair back. Please be sure to be home by five." And Aunt Retta resumed her writing.

A few minutes later Polly, having put a small pole, a little bunch of netting and a tin pail on the back seat of Flossie, was sliding down the hill toward the village. Half way down she met Zab, plodding up under the elms.

"Oh, Zabbie," she called from the car window, "will you please put fresh water for the kittens. I forgot."

"Where are you going?" shouted Zab, turning with surprise to look after the becoming dress and cap. Polly almost never dressed up during business hours.

But Flossie was already too far down the hill for a reply. It was just as well, thought Polly, for Zabbie was inclined to be a nuisance whenever she had made a new male acquaintance. As she chugged along the road to West Hill, Polly was filled with anticipation of her adventure, and she very much hoped that nice Randall Gage would have a part in it.

When she drew Flossie up in front of the little white cottage, however, the only people in sight were a small frail-looking woman in a wicker chair on the porch, and a square-faced little boy in brown corduroys, who was striding the rail with a pair of very

solid legs, and trying with obvious antics to attract attention.

"I suppose you are Polly Stebbins," said Mrs. Gage, coming to the edge of the porch, with a smile that wavered a little, and holding out her hand, as Polly came up the steps. She reminded one a bit of Aunt Nell, thought Polly at once, only without Aunt Nelly's gumption. "This is Philip," continued Mrs. Gage, indicating, with a hand that shook a little, the small boy cavorting on the rail. Polly nodded in the direction of Philip, and as she did so, she noticed a second small square face pressed firmly against the screen of the window that looked on the porch. "I have had to keep Alexander in the house for a while," Mrs. Gage explained. "It is very good of you to come over. Do you really think you will be able to manage by yourself for the whole afternoon?"

"Oh yes!" Polly spoke with cheerful confidence, looking with a shade of pity at the ineffective little person before her.

"It doesn't seem at all courteous to run off and leave you alone with them." Mrs. Gage's pale face was full of worry and uncertainty. "Randall has had to go away for the afternoon, and, to tell the truth, I have hardly known how I was going to hold up until you should come. My headaches always mean an afternoon in my room." And as she spoke, she put her slender hand to her forehead, in a gesture that reminded Polly again of Aunt Nell.

"You'd better go right away," suggested Polly. "We shall be quite all right, and I can stay until five."

"Oh, *can* you?" said Mrs. Gage, in a tone of relief; "Randall should be back by then—— And you are sure you can manage?"

"Oh yes," said Polly again.

At the foot of the little stairway just inside the door Mrs. Gage turned back for a moment.

"Alexander may come out in twenty minutes," she explained, "and perhaps later you would like to take the boys for a walk—if they will go," she added doubtfully.

"We shan't," said Philip firmly.

As soon as Mrs. Gage had disappeared wearily up the stairs, Polly glanced at her wrist watch, and walked down the steps toward Flossie.

"Are you going away again?" demanded Philip, stopping his antics in astonishment, and staring at Polly.

"No," said Polly, without looking around, "just going to get something."

She took the pole and the net from the back seat of the car. Then she sat down on the porch steps and went to work to attach the net, which was on a little hoop, to one end of the pole. She paid no attention whatever to Philip. This surprised him, as he was used to being the center of attention. He tried walking along the top of the rail, which he was forbidden to

do; then he swung perilously from some of the upper fretwork of the porch. But Polly did not even look up. After a few minutes his curiosity got the better of him.

"What you doing?" he asked, edging along the rail toward Polly.

"Making a frog net," answered Polly, still without raising her eyes.

"Oh," said Philip, sliding off the rail, and walking over to the steps, with open interest. "What do you do with it?"

"Catch frogs," said Polly.

"What for?" Philip was curious.

"Your uncle," Polly replied.

Philip stood with his hands in his pockets, his corduroy legs wide apart, his eyes glued upon Polly. He had never seen any one like her before.

"Do *you* like Uncle Ranny?" he demanded

"I don't know him very well," said Polly indifferently. "He seems all right."

"He's swell," announced Philip heartily.

"Can I come out now?" called a voice from the window that looked on the porch.

"It's Alec," said Philip. "He broke the long mirror in Granny's room. That's why he's in there. Granny said there was no reason for jumping round in front of it so much, but there was. Only Alec wouldn't tell."

"He was trying to see what was in the mirror when nobody was looking in it, I suppose," said Polly, still intent upon her net.

"*How* did you know?" said Philip, in an awe-struck voice.

"Everybody does that, until they find out it's foolish," replied Polly. "You can never turn fast enough, you know."

"Oh." Philip still regarded her with round eyes.

"Can I come out now?" reiterated the voice behind the screen, with greater urgency.

Polly glanced at her wrist watch again.

"In four minutes," she said, her eyes on the drawing-string, which she was now running in the bottom of the little net.

There was silence for a few minutes, while Philip watched, spellbound. Then Polly stood up.

"Come on, Alec," she called.

Almost before the words were out of her mouth, there was a second small square boy in brown corduroys on the porch. So far as Polly could see, the two were precisely alike, except that Alexander seemed, if possible, a little more square and solid than Philip. He was also much more silent. As a matter of fact, Alexander spoke so seldom that when he did it was well to take heed—as Polly was to find out later. Polly swung the net gaily in front of her, and smiled one of her wide sudden smiles at nobody in particular.

"I'm going frogging," she said, and ran quickly down the steps toward the car, from which the twins saw her take the tin pail.

For just a moment they hesitated. Then they, too, clattered down the steps to the car. Polly handed the net to Philip and the pail to Alexander.

"Let's run down the hill," she said, seizing a little thick hand in each of hers. And before they knew just what they were doing, Philip and Alexander, who disliked going to walk with any one, were racing like mad down the steep field behind the cottage, their stubby little shoes hardly touching the clover tops as they flew along.

"That was fun," said Philip, when they halted, breathless, at the bottom. "Let's do it again."

"No," said Polly, dropping their hands at once, "not now. We have to get the frogs." And away she walked across the level field, toward the pond that gleamed in the hollow among the trees. The twins, too interested to be surprised at themselves, followed at her heels.

It was a small, shallow pond, and the water was very quiet under the overhanging branches. Near the shore the surface was covered with a delicate green scum, above which the brilliant darning-needles darted back and forth. Here and there, where a stone or a half-sunken log showed above the water, froggy eyes blinked in the afternoon sunshine. Polly sat down at once on the bank and, to the amazement of the twins,

who stood watching every movement, began to unlace her shoes.

"You can't go in wading," said Philip, who found it hard to believe his eyes. "There are snakes in there. Ethel said so." Then, as Polly continued to pull off her stockings, "Aren't you afraid of snakes?"

"No," said Polly briefly, standing up in her bare feet.

Philip stared in admiration.

"I want to go too," he announced, bending suddenly to his own shoe laces, as also, immediately, did Alexander.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Polly carelessly. "More than one wader scares the frogs. And besides, when you go frogging the important people stay on the bank, to tell which way the frogs swim when they jump, and to put them into the pail when they are passed in."

Then Polly, turning her back upon the twins, splashed into the scummy water, the net in her hand. Philip and Alexander looked at each other, and at Polly, her brown skirt tucked up, wading out among the frogs. Then suddenly Philip scrambled up into a little tree, and Alexander sat down on a log at the top of the bank, the pail beside him.

There followed an hour of high excitement for the twins. Philip, straddling a branch, shouted shrill directions about frogs, Polly scooped swiftly about in the muddy water with the net, and Alexander, jiggling

up and down on his log, reached out with eager hands to catch the net from Polly and dump the new frogs into the pail. Every few minutes operations stopped, while Alexander counted his frogs to make sure that none had jumped out.

"I've got eleven!" he announced at last, actually breaking into speech.

"That's enough," said Polly, wading ashore, and picking up her shoes and stockings.

"Oh dear," said Philip, who did not want the fun to stop.

But it didn't.

As soon as Polly had laced her shoes, she walked over to a birch tree, and cut a piece of bark. Then she sat down on the bank and made a fleet of tiny canoes, which she set sailing on the pond with crickets in them. The game was to see how far they would sail before the crickets jumped. The twins sat as close to her as possible and watched. When the canoes were all launched, Polly skipped stones across the pond. Philip and Alexander had never seen any one's stones, even Uncle Ranny's, skip so far and so lightly. They tried skipping them too, but before they had succeeded at all, Polly was off again around the pond, doing something else that was interesting.

Philip and Alexander simply could not keep up with her, and as for Polly herself, she showed only the most casual interest in the twins. Everything that she did seemed to be simply for her own entertainment. They



An hour of high excitement for the twins.

had just caught up with her at a large ant-hill, on which she was making experiments with a stick, when she suddenly looked at her wrist-watch, and announced that they must start home at once. Leading the way to the head of the pond she handed the pail and the net to the twins and was off briskly across the field toward the cottage.

"Are you going back to your own house now?" asked Philip, as he and Alexander panted along beside her.

"Yes," said Polly.

"Will you come again to-morrow?" said Philip.

"No," replied Polly.

"Oh, dear," sighed Philip.

When they were almost at the cottage somebody came out on the porch.

"Uncle Ranny!" called Philip, running ahead. "See what we've got for you!"

Randall Gage came down the steps with a pleasant careless nod in the direction of Polly and taking the pail which Philip held toward him, lifted the cover. A green streak leaped at once from the pail into the grass.

"Hi there!" shouted Polly, laughing. "Look out for your frogs!"

For a few seconds there was a wild jumping about in front of the cottage, until the fugitive was finally re-captured under the net.

"You don't expect me to attend to all those reptiles

single-handed, do you?" said Randall, peering cautiously into the pail through a narrow aperture, as he dropped in the frog. "If you don't look out, I shall be needing a laboratory assistant, and may have to 'let Polly do it!' "

"You'd better not ask," retorted Polly at once. "I might accept, you know! I like reptiles."

"And don't you think you'll like Uncle Ranny too?" said Philip, who, with Alexander, stood listening anxiously on the bottom step.

"See here," said Randall, swinging around toward the step, "suppose you two go in and scrub up for supper."

"No," asserted Philip, "not yet."

Polly glanced over her shoulder at the twins.

"I would if I were you," she said indifferently, "or maybe I shan't come again."

Then she turned toward her car.

Philip and Alexander regarded Polly's retreating back for a moment.

"All right," said Philip, "we'll go in." And without another word they both trudged stolidly up the steps and into the house.

"By George!" said Randall Gage, staring at Polly in his turn. "A complete conquest!" And there was something besides the usual whimsical amusement in his eyes, as he opened the door of Flossie. "By the way, what do I owe you?" he added, putting his hand in his pocket, as Polly slipped in behind her wheel.

"Fifty cents," she said promptly, determined this time to be very business-like.

"You mean, an hour?" asked Randall.

"No," said Polly, "in all."

"Those two, for a whole afternoon, for fifty cents! Well, I'm not *that* kind of a skinflint!" Randall Gage took his hand from his pocket. "Here's a dollar, and the gratitude of a tormented soul."

"Oh, I couldn't take all that," said Polly, shaking her head with decision. Then, as Randall continued to stand with his foot on the running-board, and his dollar thrust through the window, Polly's face changed. "Well, I'll let you this once," she said taking the bill. "It's for the Cause. Perhaps sometime I'll tell you about that," she added, with her most engaging smile, as she started the engine.

"Good for you!" said Randall, with his usual pleasant detachment, taking his foot from the running-board. "What about coming again Friday?"

"Yes," nodded Polly, as Flossie jumped forward.

What on earth had made her speak of the Cause to Randall Gage? said Polly to herself, as she drove away. He *was* a very understanding person—the kind one talked things over with. This time she would *not* turn her head. So, with eyes straight ahead upon the road, Polly drove down West Hill, and never knew that today it was Randall Gage who looked back, and stood in front of the Bixby cottage watching, until Flossie was out of sight.

Chapter Four

PLANS AWRY

POLLY stood by the table in the baggage room of the dingy Bellport station, while Bert Leary made out the express receipt. She was looking down soberly at the crate on the table and scratching under the chin the furry face that peered anxiously out between the slats. It was a little yellow face, and it belonged to one of the kittens who had introduced Polly and Randall. Suddenly Polly lifted the crate and held it while the wet nose inside pressed itself against hers. Was it even stuffier in the crate than it was in the station, and how would it be in the baggage car?

"Oh, Bert," she said, as the old station master handed her the receipt, "may I take that pencil a minute?" And sitting on the edge of the table, she printed as blackly as possible on the top slats:

I AM THIRSTY. PLEASE GIVE ME A DRINK.

Then, without letting herself look into the crate again, she walked quickly out of the station.

"You won't forget to speak to the man on the train about the kitten, will you, Bert?" she said, as she returned the pencil. "It's terribly hot."

"There'll be a breeze in the baggage car," said the old station master gruffly, but with a gleam of friendliness in his eyes.

My, but it *was* hot, thought Polly, as she walked out through the July sunshine to Flossie at the edge of the platform. Behind the wheel, she stopped for a moment to mop her face. Just then there was a shout across the street.

"Hold on a minute, Polly," called a voice. And there by the car was a handsome, fair-haired boy in outing flannels, his foot on the running board. "I say," he began, "what are you always trying to get away from me for? And when are we going out in the motor-boat again?"

"I can't today, Neddy," said Polly shortly. "I'm busy."

"You always say that same thing, Polly," said Ned Abbott. "What are you so busy about?"

"Quite important things, if I chose to explain them," said Polly, with an airy smile.

"In other words, 'Mind your own business,' " retorted Ned, scowling. "Well, I know some of the things you're doing, Miss Polly. You're up at Bixby's a lot of the time with that Gage fellow doing experiments, I suppose. Henry Gill says he has a regular laboratory in his shed."

"You don't have to go to Henry Gill to find out about the Gages," replied Polly, scowling too, in her effort to make her brows level like Aunt Retta's. "When you want to know anything, just come to me. I go up there three times a week. Now if you will kindly take your foot off the running board, Mr. Edwin, I will proceed on my way. This is not exactly the coolest spot in the world for repartee."

Whereupon Polly started her engine, and went jouncing away from the platform, leaving Ned Abbott looking ruefully after her. Just as she turned Flossie into Main Street, however, Polly glanced back through the car window, with the sudden smile that nobody could resist.

"Cheer up, Neddy," she called. "Scowls are not becoming to your style. If it's a good day Saturday, perhaps I'll go out."

But before she had driven a block Polly had dismissed Ned Abbott from her mind and was thinking of other things—especially of yesterday, and of the three hours that she had spent with Randall Gage in his shed laboratory. Philip and Alexander had gone unexpectedly on a long drive into the country with Mrs. Gage, and Polly, set free, had had a delightful afternoon. She and Randall had worked on a collection of bright-winged moths which he had caught the day before, examining them under the glass and checking them up in the big entomology. Then to-

gether they had mounted the moths, Polly helping to set the fragile bodies on the pins and to adjust the delicate, powdery wings. And Randall had told her, quite casually, that she had deft fingers!

It was this very casualness that made it such fun to work with Randall. He was just a good comrade, with nothing sentimental or uncomfortable about him, as there was about other boys. For, after all, he *was* a boy, since he had only graduated from college this June. He must be smart to be going back as laboratory assistant in the fall. She did like smart people, said Polly to herself, as she ran Flossie slowly into the driveway of the Stebbins mansion. Oh, dear, there was Zabbie over in his yard!

Zab, however, was so intent upon the trellis, which he was nailing to the side of the Eaton house, that for once he did not hear the sound of the car, and Polly, bringing Flossie to a stop as noiselessly as possible, jumped out and slipped quickly around the corner of the Stebbins mansion into the garden. A fresh breeze from the river blew up the garden path, cooling the air and bringing to Polly a hundred sweet scents mingled in the sunshine. She walked slowly along, trailing her hands in the spirea and stopping to bury her face in the great shaggy white peonies that in early July filled the garden with fragrant snowdrifts. It was just as she raised her face from the peonies that she saw Henry Gill drawing up his car

in front of the gate and putting a letter in the Stebbins box.

"Guess you folks got what you want this time," called the old postman, who knew everybody's business.

Polly ran quickly up the garden path and down the walk to the gate, the scent of the peonies still in her nostrils. It was long before she was able to disassociate them from the hour that followed, or to tolerate their clean sweet smell. Both Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell were standing at the screen door as Polly came up the walk.

"Here it is!" she called jubilantly, as she ran up the steps, waving the thin square envelope. "It's from Debby!"

"Give it to me, child," said Aunt Retta, holding out an impatient and not quite steady hand. "We will come in here to read it." And clasping the letter against her crutch, Miss Henrietta led the way into the drawing-room.

Aunt Nell helped Aunt Retta to settle herself on the little sofa by the fireplace, and sat down beside her, while Polly ran to the secretary for the paper-knife. Aunt Retta never liked to have letters torn raggedly open. With what patience she could muster, Polly stood on the hearth beneath Great-grandmother's portrait while Aunt Retta carefully slit the envelope and drew out the thin sheets covered with Debby's clear beautiful writing. Aunt Nell sat

quietly, a look of happy expectation on her face, but she made no move to glance at the letter, or to hurry her sister in any way. It was tacitly understood that Aunt Retta always skimmed the first cream. She did so now, holding the letter at arm's length as she was without her glasses and running her eye rapidly down the page while the others waited in suspense.

"Oh," she exclaimed, as she reached the bottom of the sheet. "Oh, dear!"

"What is it?" said Aunt Nell, moving, startled, toward her sister.

"For goodness sake, *read* it, Aunt Retta," said Polly, clapping her hands together, her scanty patience quite at an end. "Please *read* it."

Miss Henrietta looked up from the page before her, to stare for a moment in stern surprise at Polly, but her thoughts were elsewhere and when she spoke it was not in rebuke.

"She's not coming—not this year," said Miss Henrietta, and Polly knew by the cool, even voice that Aunt Retta was having to make a strong effort at self-control. "And after everything was settled but the date. I don't like changes at the last minute."

"No doubt she has a good reason," said Aunt Nell quietly. "Shall I read the letter aloud? I have my reading glasses right here."

"Very well," said Miss Henrietta shortly, passing the letter to her sister.

How could Aunt Retta give way to mere annoy-

ance now, thought Polly—now, at this cruel moment. Polly could not see that far more than annoyance was hidden behind the severe face, or guess that it concealed a disappointment almost as keen as her own. As for Polly, she stood before her aunts, clasping her hands so tightly together that they hurt, and feeling as if the bottom had dropped out of things. *Debby not coming! Not this year!*

DEAR FAMILY, (began Aunt Nell)

Forgive me for this long delay, but everything has been so uncertain that I have waited until I could send you some definite word, thinking each day that it would be settled. And now at last it is—but I don't know quite how to tell you my news. For Eric has had another letter from Mr. Gregory of the Columbian Museum, giving him a commission to do some work in Rome next winter and so we are to stay over here until next spring after all.

You know, don't you, how hard it has been to make this decision, that means giving up seeing you all in September, but we feel that Eric's future is involved. Although Mr. Gregory said nothing definite in his letter, we read between the lines that he may have Eric in mind for an assistant curator at the Museum later on and the work in Rome would be an important factor in that, as well as giving E. material for the writing he already has in mind.

You will understand how sorry, *sorry* we are not to be coming back to you this fall, after all

our plans and anticipations. It seems to me that I just cannot wait any longer for you to see our little Eleanor. She is well and rosy and full of energy—a real Stebbins, Aunt Retta! And we still think she is the image of Aunt Nell. But, as Eric says, it is not as if we had not had good news of you all winter. Spring will come before we know it, and we shall surely spend next summer at Bellport.

I must get this into the mail at once for tomorrow's steamer, but I will write more fully later. We all send much love. I am sure you know how we hate this long separation.

Devotedly,

DEBBY

Miss Eleanor quietly folded the letter and put it into its envelope, and for a moment nobody spoke. Then Miss Henrietta lifted her head in a way she had when Stebbins affairs were under consideration.

"Eric will make a name for himself," she said proudly, all trace of annoyance gone from her face. "He has great talent."

"Debby will find much to interest her in a Roman winter, with the opportunities to paint," said Miss Eleanor.

Polly stared at her aunts, sitting before her with such dignified composure, their hands folded on their laps as serenely as Great-grandmother's over the mantel. For the moment they were incomprehensible to her eager youth.

"Don't you care a bit about Debby's not coming?" she said vehemently, in the full flush of her bitter disappointment.

Miss Henrietta and Miss Eleanor looked at Polly with surprise in their delicate, high-bred faces and a shadow flickered across Aunt Nell's.

"Of course," she said quickly. "But it is a fine opening for them and we must make the best of it."

"It is not the Stebbins way to rebel at the inevitable, Polly," said Aunt Retta. "And now if you will put on some hot water, I think I should like a cup of tea."

But Polly, Stebbins though she was, felt hot rebellion in her heart as she walked quickly out of the room and along the hall to the kitchen. *Debby not coming!* Oh, it just could not be true! Polly's longing for her sister never wavered, although she was careful that no one, not even Debby herself, should guess how she had counted the months and the weeks to the home-coming. And now there would be another year to wait!

Polly detested tears and her eyes were quite dry as she mechanically put the kettle on and set out the cups for tea. Nevertheless, it seemed to her that she went blindly about the familiar kitchen. A few moments later, with the same sense of blindness, she pushed open a door in the back hall and went into the room that had been Debby's studio. Although four years had passed since Debby had gone away, the little workshop still seemed hers, with the easel

in the corner, the dried paint brushes in a jar upon the shelf and Great-grandfather's carved sea-chest in which Debby had kept her drawing papers. Here, in a secret hiding place under the drawing papers, the family jewels had been strangely discovered six years ago, bringing good fortune to the Stebbins mansion, and clothing the old chest with a permanent charm and mystery. But it was because it had been Debby's that Polly, whenever she was in trouble, came to sit on its sturdy lid to think things through.

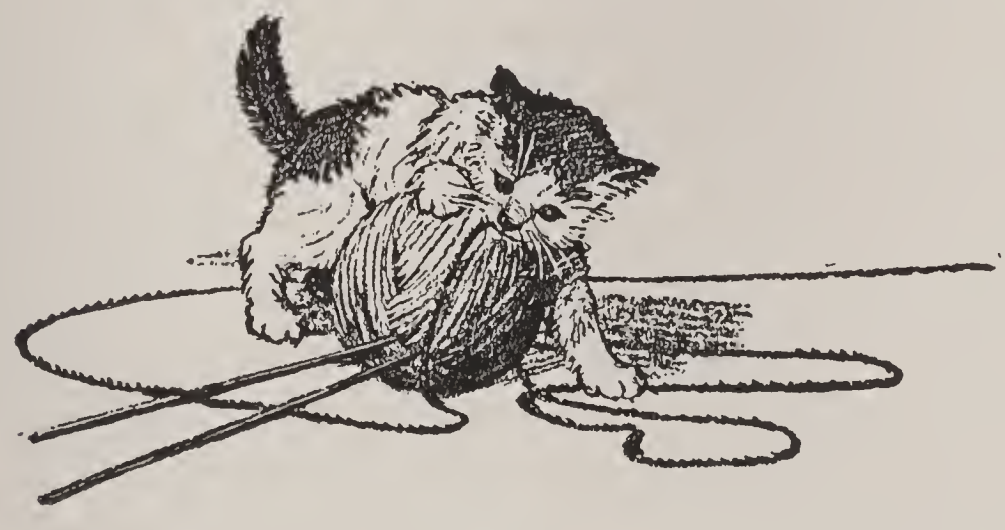
She sat there today, her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands, looking out through the open door that led from the studio into the garden, a thoroughly disconsolate Polly. Not until this moment had she realized how much she longed for Debby—to see her and little Eleanor and to talk over things about the aunts and college. Suddenly she sat up straight on the old chest, a startled look on her dark thin face. College! But how could she go if Debby were not to be here? How could Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell be left alone in this great house, frail as they were? From where she sat, she could see them now, strolling down the garden path together as they sometimes did before tea. Aunt Retta always seemed more infirm out of doors, picking her way carefully with her crutches, and Aunt Nell looked littler than ever today among the high bushes of the path.

And yet how *could* she give up college? For a few minutes even the keen disappointment about Debby

faded before this dread possibility that her happy plans would fail. No, she just would *not* stay at home another winter, said Polly to herself with an involuntary stamp of her foot upon the floor. It was not fair. Why should young people with life ahead of them and heaps of splendid things calling them out into the world, be asked to give them up for old people whose life was practically over? Nobody expected that nowadays. Self-sacrifice and all that sort of thing were old-fashioned. Even such a mossback as old Dr. Belcher up at the Academy had talked about the need for self-expression. Well, then, she, Polly, was not going to express herself any longer in Bellport. And that was *that*. What was it Randall Gage had said yesterday about the fun it must be to come out of a chrysalis if you were a moth—Randall Gage! And it would mean that she would not see him at Sanbornville next winter! No, *of course* she would go.

Then through the open door Polly saw her aunts coming slowly back up the garden path, their heads held high in spite of disappointment and infirmity and age. She thought of how they had sat together on the sofa with Debby's letter in their hands, accepting with quiet dignity and no word of complaint the sacrifice required of them. And, with a flash of insight, Polly knew that in their Stebbins pride and independence they themselves would never ask her to give up college.

But Polly was a Stebbins too, and deep within her was something that she could not disregard even if she would. As she looked at her old aunts coming toward her through the garden, Polly, who almost never bowed her head, put her face into her hands. For she suddenly knew that it was she who must tell them that she would not be going to Sanbornville in the fall.



Chapter Five

PUT OFF UNTIL TO-MORROW

As she lay in bed that night in her great square room at the back of the house, staring into the dark, Polly decided that she would tell Aunt Retta the very first thing in the morning. It was a Stebbins habit, when disagreeable things had to be done, to do them at once. And having made her decision, Polly, who never brooded, went directly to sleep.

But when she opened her eyes again upon the morning sunshine streaming in at the high old windows, she found that she had the same dull ache within her with which she had gone to bed. It was a new experience for Polly, not to wake up with fresh zest for the new day and she did not like it. Well, she would feel better, she told herself as she jumped out of bed when she had had her interview with Aunt Retta. The sooner dressing and breakfast were over, the sooner the whole thing would be settled. With her usual despatch, Polly put on her clothes, selecting her most becoming white shorts and blouse, and tying

a gay red bandeau about her perverse black hair. No interview with Aunt Retta was ever easy but she was always, as Polly well knew, susceptible to neatness. As Polly adjusted her bandeau before the mirror, her eye fell upon the latest snapshot of little Eleanor, stuck in the edge of the glass—a fair slender child with Debby's eyes. With an impatient gesture, Polly turned from the mirror. Not until *next year*—oh, how *could* they!

As quickly as possible Polly went down the long curving stairs, for it was after half past seven and Aunt Retta was very particular about promptness at meals. But when Polly came into the dining-room, it was Aunt Nell who was just sitting down behind the coffee urn. Aunt Retta had had a poor night and her breakfast had already been taken up.

Aunt Nell herself looked a little worn and tired this morning but she was as cheerful as usual, in her own quiet way, speaking of the work that was to be done in the garden this week if the weather were fine and of affairs in the village, but there was no word of Debby. Polly was grateful to Aunt Nell for this, for she felt that she could not have borne it there at the breakfast table where there was no escape. Aunt Nelly always knew and avoided the things that hurt. It was not until they rose from the table that the subject that filled both their minds was at last broached.

"I shall write to Debby this morning," said Aunt

Nell, as she went toward the kitchen with the coffee urn. "Would you like to put a word in, Polly?"

"Yes, please," said Polly, turning abruptly toward the opposite door. "I will get Aunt Retta's tray now and be sure to leave the errands for me."

Arrived at Aunt Retta's door, Polly knocked and went in. Miss Henrietta was lying in the big four-poster, her aristocratic head against a pile of pillows, her long slender hands spread upon the counterpane. The lavender of her bed jacket made her face look even paler than usual and the listlessness of her attitude on the pillows gave her, who usually sat so erect, an air of being really ill. Polly was a little startled as she came across the room toward the bed.

"Good morning, Aunt Retta," she said, trying to sound as cheerful as usual. "I'm sorry you had a bad night. Are you through with your tray?"

"Yes, please take it," said Miss Henrietta, with reassuring energy, and a gesture toward the bedside table, her eyes meanwhile looking her niece critically up and down.

It struck Polly that it was going to be less easy than usual this morning to talk to Aunt Retta about anything. Her resolve was made, however, and here she was beside the bed, so, standing very straight, the tray in her hands, she looked directly down at the stiff figure against the pillows.

"There is something I want to say to you, Aunt Retta," began Polly—and hesitated for a moment. It

was an unfortunate hesitation, for at that moment Aunt Retta herself spoke.

"And there is something I have wished for some time to say to you, Polly," she said firmly. "I believe I shall have to tell you that I don't like seeing you in shorts." And her eyes fastened themselves upon the crisp, abbreviated garment which had been selected with such forethought.

Polly stared at her aunt in astonishment at this unexpected turn in the conversation.

"Do you mean that you prefer my slacks, Aunt Retta?" she enquired, with the flicker of a smile.

Miss Henrietta regarded the thin keen face above the breakfast tray, and thought with a secret dash of pride that Polly certainly had the Stebbins gift of repartee.

"I do not think you intend to be pert, Polly," she said stiffly, "but I cannot have you speak to me like that."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Retta," replied Polly, who always looked more pert than she felt, "but you see I have to wear that kind of clothes at my work."

"That is another thing I wish to talk to you about," continued Miss Henrietta, a slight flush coming into her pale cheeks. "I should have spoken of it yesterday if—if the other matter had not put it out of my mind. When I was driving with Judge Parker in the morning I saw for the first time a sign on a tree up the road, which I am afraid you are responsible for, and

which I wish removed before this day is over."

"But it brings in business, Aunt Retta," explained Polly. "And I thought you would rather have it there than on the gate."

"The gate?" repeated Aunt Retta. "I am not quite sure what you mean, Polly, but I hope that you understand that I will *not* have the Stebbins name, and yours, paraded cheaply along the highroad like that. Are there other signs anywhere else?"

"No," said Polly, feeling her customary good nature slipping a little.

"Will you see, then, that this one is taken down at once?" Aunt Retta's lips were a very thin straight line. "Or shall *I* have it removed?"

"I don't think I want it taken down," said Polly slowly, looking directly at Aunt Retta, her own lips rather tight.

"Do you mean that you defy me, Polly?" Aunt Retta raised herself slightly from her pillows. It was seldom that these two, high-spirited though they both were, had a really serious encounter.

"No," said Polly. "But business is business, and I've got to advertise. You yourself wouldn't want a Stebbins enterprise to go to pieces, would you, Aunt Retta, after it had made a good start?"

"I will not have that sign on that tree," repeated Miss Henrietta. "And I will not have shorts going about the Stebbins mansion. Have I made myself clear, Polly?"

"Yes, perfectly, Aunt Retta," said Polly. And without another word she turned and walked out of the room.

Could any one be expected to make sacrifices, when it meant putting up with *that* sort of thing? said Polly to herself, her head held as high as Aunt Retta's, as she went down the stairs with the tray. It would certainly be some time before the subject of staying at home would be broached, so far as she was concerned. As for the sign on the tree, Aunt Retta could have it removed herself, if she chose. She, Polly would leave it where it was.

Having left the tray in the kitchen, Polly walked quickly through the hall toward the front door. She felt suddenly a strong desire to get away from the house—to be out in Flossie along the roads, in the freshness of the clear summer morning. But as she went by the door of the drawing-room, she caught a glimpse of Aunt Nell sitting at the old secretary. How characteristic of Aunt Nelly, thought Polly, pausing at the door, to be quietly writing to Debby, while she and Aunt Retta squabbled upstairs. For a moment she seemed to see what Aunt Nelly's life had been all these years in the Stebbins mansion. Poor Aunt Nelly! Impulsively Polly turned back along the hall, and going into Debby's workshop and sitting down at the table by the window, she wrote a note to her sister on a piece of Debby's old drawing-paper which she found in the drawer. What she said she

hardly knew herself, but it was a Stebbins letter, with no word of complaint for what must be. Then, having given it to Aunt Nell for enclosure in hers, Polly went out the front door and down the walk to her car with some measure of returning cheerfulness.

As Flossie started off down the Stebbins hill, Polly decided that she would drive to the Gages'. She had half promised Philip and Alexander that they might go with her after kittens. The twins were always diverting, and Mrs. Gage would welcome the sight of Flossie at any time of day. Besides, perhaps Randall might have some commission for her. He was usually at home in the early morning.

She was hardly more than halfway up West Hill before she saw, as usual, the square figures of Philip and Alexander running on sturdy legs down the road toward the car. It seemed that the twins must keep a perpetual look-out for her, so invariably did they come hastening to meet her.

"Hello," said Polly, stopping the car, while a twin clambered on each running board. "Want to go for a ride?"

"Sure we do!" shouted Philip, and they both jumped up and down for joy.

"Then go and ask Uncle Ranny if you may," said Polly.

"He's out," said Philip, "but we'll ask Granny."

And away went the twins toward the cottage.

Almost before Polly had had time to turn the car,

they were back, squeezing in together on the seat beside her, Philip first, because he always carried on the conversation. They were hardly seated and the engine started before he began.

"You're coming to Sanbornville to live next year, aren't you?" he said, looking up at Polly, with eyes very bright and eager. "And we can have fun all the time, can't we?"

"Who told you that?" asked Polly, surprised out of her usual composure at the broaching of the subject at this particular moment.

"Uncle Ranny," said Philip. "He says you're coming to the college where he and my father teach. Will you come over to our house every day?"

"Where is your father this summer?" enquired Polly, thinking to change the conversation.

"He went away on a big boat," said Philip, "and Mummy went too— *Will* you come to our house?"

"I don't know," Polly sighed. "I may not go to Sanbornville at all."

"Why *not?*" demanded Philip, while both he and Alexander stared up at her with round eyes. Their faces looked so solemn and dismayed that Polly laughed.

"Your president has never seen me, you know," she said. "Perhaps he wouldn't want me."

"*Yes,* he would," Philip declared loyally.

"We'll tell him you're all right," said Alexander unexpectedly.

"He'll like you," Philip announced with conviction. "*We* do, and Uncle Ranny and Granny and—and everybody."

"Look here," said Polly, bringing Flossie to a sudden stop, where a heavy gate barred the way into a wood road, "that's a short cut to the main highway. I don't suppose you two are strong enough to open that gate, are you?"

"Yes, we are!" cried Philip, tumbling over Alexander, as they both scrambled from the car.

Polly watched with amusement, while the twins fumbled anxiously with the big hook, and set their sturdy shoulders to the creaking bars. When Flossie was through the gate and the twins had hooked it again, Polly was glad to find that they had apparently forgotten the subject of college.

"This is a jolly road," she said, as they squeezed into the front seat once more, "with lots of bumps. And just at the end of it there's a house with three black kittens in it."

"Can we bring them back with us?" Philip demanded.

"Yes," said Polly.

It was sweet and still in the wood road and there were plenty of jolly bumps as Polly had said. The twins, sitting very straight and looking ahead under the sugar maples for the end of the road, jounced up and down and sideways against each other and Polly. Presently they saw a little house among the trees.

Philip pointed to it. "Is that where the black kittens are?"

"No," said Polly, "it's a sugar house."

"But it's brown," objected Philip, "and sugar is white."

"It's a maple sugar house," laughed Polly.

The twins looked back at it regretfully as they jounced along further into the woods. After a while Flossie ran out from among the trees, and there was the main highway, a thin white ribbon of cement stretching far away over the green hills to Sanbornville. By the side of the highway was a small unpainted house. A girl in a shabby cotton dress was standing on the porch, and as soon as she saw Polly drawing up at the gate she turned and went into the house. When she came out she was carrying three fluffy black kittens.

"We want to hold them," said Philip, as he and Alexander scrambled over the front seat into the back of the car.

When the kittens had been passed in through the window, and the girl had received her money, Polly turned Flossie down the highway.

"Want to go summer coasting?" she asked, glancing around at the twins.

"Yes," said both Philip and Alexander.

In a moment they were sliding down the long cement slope, the twins on the edge of the back seat, clutching the kittens, Polly lifting her head to the

fresh, clean breeze that blew in at the window. It seemed to blow away all the tiresome business of the early morning. They went on and on for a long ride, with ice cream cones at the end of it, and it was not until they were returning home along the highway that the joy of the day was broken.

"Oh!" said Philip suddenly, in a tone of consternation. And Polly looked back just in time to see him drawing a folded slip of paper from his pocket.

"It's for you," said Philip, handing it over the back of the seat.

On the outside of the paper were the words, "Miss Polly Stebbins," and on the inside it read as follows:

> DEAR POLLY,
>
> Could you give me an hour or two this morning with the moths? I want to get them done today, to ship this week. I shall be back by 10:30, and we could work until twelve.
>
> Yours,
>
> RANDALL GAGE.

Polly glanced at her wrist watch. It was a quarter of twelve.

"Where did you get this note?" she demanded. Philip had never before heard Polly speak in that tone of voice, and he was dismayed.

"It—it was pinned on our front door, but we took it so we could give it to you," he said, finding it a comfort to include Alexander in the sin.

"Why didn't you, then?" said Polly, in the same ominous voice, without looking around.

"I—we forgot," stuttered Philip.

"Well, the next time you find anything with a name on it, you will go straight to the owner with it. Have I made myself clear?" said Polly, imitating Aunt Retta's voice, with the flicker of a smile, which the twins could not see.

"Yes," said Philip, almost below his breath.

Polly stepped on the accelerator, and in less than fifteen minutes Flossie was bouncing up West Hill. Randall Gage was standing in front of the cottage as they came up. With a nod to Polly, he came to open the door for the twins, taking care this time that there should be no escaping kittens.

"I'm no end sorry," said Polly, when she had explained about the note to Randall, whose attention seemed to be taken up with ruffling the hair of the twins. "I suppose I'm too late for the moths."

He turned to her then, with one of his sudden smiles of good comradeship.

"No, you're not," he said with pleasant decision. "I kept them for to-morrow, hoping to let Polly do it. Can you come?"

Polly tried her best to look indifferent but she found it impossible.

"Yes," she said, her face more vivid than she knew, as she looked through the window at Randall, with a twin on either side. Philip and Alexander stood, wist-

ful and subdued, their eyes on Polly. Suddenly she turned and, reaching over the back of the seat, picked up one of the kittens.

"Will you remember to feed it every single day, if I give it to you?" she said, holding the kitten through the window.

"Oh, yes," cried both the twins, their faces full of happiness again.

Dropping the kitten into Philip's outstretched hands, Polly turned abruptly to the wheel of her car. In spite of everything, the world was a pretty nice place after all!



Chapter Six

WHERE, OH, WHERE?

POLLY, in working slacks and an old dark blouse, squatted before the oil stove in a corner of the shed, prodding the wick of one of the burners with a fork. On the other burner stood a kettle of half-cooked fish, while behind Polly and on both sides of her a swarm of kittens sniffed the fragrant steam with hungry noses, and rubbed themselves first against her and then against the legs of the stove. Suddenly, with an impatient shake of her head, she got up from the floor and, picking her way among the kittens, walked over to the window that looked toward the Eatons'.

Twice she gave the whistle with which she always summoned Zab, and stood, her dark brows drawn together in a frown, watching for her obedient servant. But he did not appear. What a nuisance, thought Polly. Where on earth could he be? He had a way lately of disappearing whenever she particularly wanted him. And now she needed him for the stove. It was funny how Zabbie could always seem to hypnotize that old stove into working decently.

Still frowning, she turned back toward it. Just at that moment the outer door of the shed opened and there stood Zab, his face redder than usual and, Polly fancied, a little self-conscious, if not actually guilty.

"Well, *there* you are," she said. "I should say it was about time you appeared. It was your turn to boil the fish for the kittens. Where have you been all the afternoon?"

"Whew!" said Zab, dodging her question, as he walked across the shed toward the smoking wick. "Why don't you cook the cats' fish in the kitchen, instead of fussing with this old stove?"

"It has never been the custom of the Stebbins mansion," said Polly, in the unmistakable voice of Aunt Retta, "to tolerate within its walls the aroma of day-before-yesterday's hake—stupid. Fix that wick, will you, like an angel. You're pretty useful, you know." She held out the fork, with a smile.

Zab, however, disregarding the fork, took a large jackknife out of his pocket with which he went to work upon the wick. Boys, even Zab, always somehow managed to have a better equipment than girls for meeting life, thought Polly, watching him on his knees before the stove, the kittens clambering over his legs. The day was sultry, and Zabbie's red face looked more hot and moist than usual as he struggled with the wick.

"I don't know why you want to bother with these

kittens and their fish, anyway," he said, with unexpected peevishness. "You don't even know what you're going to do with the money when you get it."

Polly looked down in astonishment at the bent shoulders. She could not remember a time when Zabbie had not been both willing and eager in her service.

"Who said I didn't, Mr. Eaton?" she retorted austerely. "I have a very worthy Cause, if I cared to reveal it to you. And, by the way, I believe you did not answer my question as to where you had been, and why you did not come with the fish the middle of the afternoon."

Before Zab could reply there was a sudden roll of distant thunder.

"Oh, dash it all!" exclaimed Polly, going swiftly to the window, and looking out. "It's awfully black in the west. I'll have to go right away. Last time I didn't get there until the storm was almost over, and Miss Pickett was nearly in a faint."

Zab stood up and looked across the room toward the window, through which the lightning was already vivid in the sky.

"You can't go out now, Polly," he said. "It's going to be a big storm."

"That's just it," replied Polly. "Miss Pickett's scared to death of big ones. I don't mind—except that she always wants to hold my hand," added Polly, with a wry smile. "But then, she gives me twenty-five cents every time."

There was a still louder clap of thunder. The storm was evidently approaching rapidly.

"I'll have to go just as I am," said Polly hurriedly, glancing at her disreputable slacks, "and you'll have to finish the fish, Zabbie, and feed the kittens." As she spoke, she snatched up one of the kittens from the floor. "We'd be lost without Zabbie, wouldn't we?" she added, holding it against her cheek.

Then, hastily dropping the kitten, and taking an old canvas hat from a nail, she ran out of the shed. Flossie was standing just outside, and jumping into the car, Polly went bounding out of the yard and down the Thomaston road. The thunder and lightning were heavy and sharp now, and the sky through the elms behind her was inky black, but the road was still dry and Polly pushed Flossie to the limit of her rattling speed, racing the storm. Miss Pickett's house was already in sight before at last the downpour was upon them. A minute later Polly had parked Flossie outside the small yellow cottage, and was dashing up the gravel path through the rain to the door. It was hastily opened and closed by Miss Pickett herself, who was waiting, white and trembling, just inside.

"I thought you'd forgotten, Polly," she said, leading the way across the room to a sofa, as distant as possible from the windows, over which the shades had been tightly drawn. "Do you think it's going to last very long? Do you want to light the lamp?"



It was hastily opened.

"No," said Polly, who had had enough of kerosene wicks for one day. "It will be over pretty soon."

But Polly was wrong. For almost an hour the storm continued with unabated fury, while she sat on the sofa, holding, like a martyr, the little shaking hand, and recounting all the amusing things that she could think of in connection with her business. Miss Pickett was normally interested in cats, owning, in fact, the handsomest one in Bellport, which had once taken a prize at a Portland cat show, but today she did not seem to get the point of anything and Polly thought that the storm would never end.

At last, however, the shades of the two little windows no longer flashed into vivid squares of yellow, and the thunder became only a distant mutter down the coast. Polly looked at her wrist watch and got up from the sofa.

"It's almost six," she said. "I shall have to go now."

"Couldn't you stay for supper?" suggested Miss Pickett anxiously, taking a quarter from the pocket of her apron, as she followed Polly across the room. "We might have another storm, you know—and I have raised biscuits all ready for the oven."

"No," said Polly decidedly, opening the front door. "Thanks just the same, but I must run along. It won't rain any more. See, there's a clear streak in the west already. You'd better be looking for a rainbow, Miss Pickett." And she ran down the path, turning to wave gaily to the still anxious little person in the

doorway. What must it be like, thought Miss Pickett, to be as energetic and unafraid as that?

Polly drew a long breath as she slammed the door of the car. What a relief to be out of that stuffy parlor, with a wheel, instead of those trembling fingers in one's hand. It must be a bore to be so scared of things. And how jolly it was after the rain. A slanting ray of sunshine through the breaking clouds made every leaf along the road sparkle and all the sweetness of the pastures seemed to have been washed into the air. Polly drove along through the summer evening, feeling more happy and exhilarated than she had felt since the day Debby's letter had come. Across the wet pastures to the right she could see West Hill and the Gage cottage with the sunset behind it. To-morrow the twins were to be away with their grandmother again and she was going up to work in the shed laboratory with Randall. Polly smiled.

She was still smiling as she drove past the big oak where she and Zab had nailed the sign. Looking up quickly, she saw that it was still there. Aunt Retta's bark was always worse than her bite. But the sign brought back to Polly thoughts of that interview two days ago in Aunt Retta's bedroom, and her face sobered. Her acute sense of annoyance with her aunt had disappeared—as it always did, for Polly did not harbor grudges—but she had not again brought herself to the point of speaking about next winter. Well,

probably she would better get it over with tonight after supper. Polly sighed as she drove Flossie into the yard of the Stebbins mansion. But the interview was not to be this evening.

There was a slight constraint at the supper table, for Polly, having to change from the disreputable slacks into a dress, was late in coming downstairs, and Aunt Retta in her black silk sat stiffly behind the silver tea service. Polly tried to enliven the conversation with an account of her afternoon but it was not altogether a success.

"Such a fool as Maria Pickett should not be allowed to live alone," said Miss Henrietta. "And I certainly don't see why she should expect other people's meal hours to be interfered with because she is afraid of thunder."

"Oh, she's not without her good points, Aunt Retta," said Polly, her head a little on one side, as she looked across the table. "She said today there was no family like the Stebbinses in all Bellport."

"Humph," said Miss Henrietta, wtih raised eyebrows, as she rose from the table, "Maria and all the Picketts have good reason to know that."

What did Aunt Retta mean by *that?* thought Polly, ever curious, as she carried out the plates. She must ask Aunt Nell while they were washing the dishes. But this was not to be either. For before the table was cleared, the telephone rang, and Polly in the

kitchen could hear Aunt Nell taking an arresting message in the back hall.

"What!" said Aunt Nell's usually quiet voice in quick, startled tones. "The twins? No, they're not. Oh, no, we haven't. When? Oh, dear, dear. Yes—yes—of course she will. I'll tell her at once. Polly," said Aunt Nell, putting down the receiver, and turning hastily toward the kitchen, where Polly stood transfixed in the doorway, with a dish in each hand, "the little Gage twins have run away—after they were put to bed—and young Mr. Gage wants to know if you will lend him your car to hunt for them. His is in the garage."

"Of course," said Polly, putting the dishes on the chair, and rushing through Debby's studio and the side door to the driveway, where Flossie stood.

In less than ten minutes Polly was rattling up West Hill. Halfway up the headlights suddenly revealed a figure striding down the road toward the car. It was Randall. Polly brought Flossie to a creaking stop, and flung open the door. For a moment before he jumped in beside her, she had a glimpse of his face which was haggard and sober.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "You're a brick. I knew I could count on you."

"Where do you want to go?" asked Polly, in a voice that sounded strangely flat in her own ears, thrilled as she was by his tone of confident friendship.

"Back to the house," he said shortly. "Do you

mind staying with Mother, while I go out with the car?"

"Why—no—of course not," said Polly, annoyed with herself for feeling, at such a moment, a twinge of disappointment. "How did it happen? Have you any clues?"

"No," said Randall, "not one. When I looked into their room half an hour ago they had vanished. Never got into bed at all. But their flashlight was gone, and their sweaters."

Nothing more was said until Flossie drew up in front of the white cottage, and Polly jumped out.

"I shall go along the Bascom Bay road," said Randall to her through the window of the car, "and then over to the main highway, and out to the little circus they saw the other day when they were driving with Mother. It would be exactly like them to decide to join it. If I don't get a line on them there I shall notify the police, and I'll call you later from somewhere." With a nod of his head, he was off, plunging down the hill into the darkness. Mrs. Gage, white and frightened, opened the door for Polly.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she said, in a voice that shook. "I don't see how I could have stayed here alone. Randall has been down to the pond, but there was nothing to be found. You don't think they would go there, do you?" she added, looking up into Polly's face, with scared eyes.

"No," said Polly at once, with reassuring calm.

"They're too smart. There wouldn't be anything to do there at night. I'm sure they've gone off along the roads. They're always wanting to explore things, you know."

Somewhat relieved by Polly's confident words, Mrs. Gage walked across the room, and drew a small sofa toward the lamp.

"If only we could *do* something," she said, clasping her hands, "but I suppose we can only sit down here together and wait."

"I'll stay by the window, if you don't mind," said Polly, "Then I can see anything coming." The day had seemed all too full of little frightened women on sofas, with hands to be held.

But in a few minutes Mrs. Gage was up again, moving restlessly from the window to the door, and back to Polly at the window.

"You don't suppose they could have gone to the docks, or along the railroad, do you?" she said, her face suddenly full of fresh anxiety.

"No," said Polly, with an assurance she no longer felt, as time went on, and the telephone did not ring. "I think Randall will find them at the little circus—or somewhere."

But at half past nine Randall telephoned that he had not been able to find any trace of Philip and Alexander, either at the circus grounds or along the roads. He had notified the constable, who had telephoned the police at Thomaston. He himself had

been to half the houses in Bellport but nobody had seen the twins. He was just starting out along the Thomaston road again, and he did not know how far he might have to go. He urged that his mother go to bed, as there was nothing she could do. "Tell her the boys are bound to turn up safe and sound in the morning," he ended, and hung up the receiver.

Never, thought Polly, had there been such a long night. It was twelve before distracted little Mrs. Gage could be induced to lie down upon her bed, but she was up again immediately to ask if Polly thought it possible that Philip and Alexander had fallen into the quarry behind the Daggett farm. By two she had quite convinced herself, and had almost persuaded Polly, that the twins had been kidnapped. And it was not until just before dawn, when Polly had gone to make her a cup of coffee, that she fell at last into an exhausted sleep.

Polly, pausing at the door with the coffee, was suddenly aware of a familiar rattle somewhere outside, which became every moment more distinct. Hastily setting the cup on the table by the bed, she flew down the stairs, and opened the front door just as Flossie came to a stop before the steps. Her heart sank as she saw that there was nobody but Randall in the car.

"Haven't you heard anything?" she faltered, going down to the car.

"No," said Randall wearily, his hands still on the

wheel. "How's mother?" In the faint dawn his face looked gray as well as haggard.

"She's asleep," said Polly. "Come in and I'll get you a cup of coffee. I've got some all ready."

"I can't stop," said Randall. "I must go back at once. As soon as it's light enough we're going to comb the woods between here and Thomaston—though I don't believe anything will come of it. If they were really running away, they may have hidden in the edge of the woods for the night, but they would never go far in. Towns and houses are what the twins like to explore."

"They might have tried a short cut," suggested Polly. "It's a long way, you know, around to the highway by the Bascom Bay——" She stopped speaking, and her face, which had been for so many hours unusually sober, grew suddenly vivid, as it did when Polly was visited by one of her quick intuitions.

"Randall," she cried, running around the car, and getting swiftly into the seat beside him, "quick! Step on the gas. I know now!"

For all at once Polly had guessed where Philip and Alexander had spent the night!

Chapter Seven

MIDSUMMER NIGHTMARE

It was half past six on the evening of the storm, and Philip and Alexander, in blue cotton pajamas, were leaning over the railing in the upper hall of the Gage cottage, listening intently. They had had their supper and were supposed to be in bed, but the twins were not often where they were expected to be.

"They've gone into the dining-room," whispered Philip. "Now's the time."

"We'll have to hurry," Alexander whispered back. "Granny will come up as soon as she's through, and we must be across the field by then." Though he spoke little, Alexander was an excellent manager.

The twins tip-toed back into their room and slipped out of their pajamas. They dressed themselves as quickly as they could, helping each other with buttons, and not stopping to tie their sneakers. Then Philip took a flashlight and Alexander a paper bag containing four doughnuts, which had been concealed in the back of the closet since morning, and

they tip-toed out into the hall again. When they were halfway down the stairs Alexander remembered the sweaters and insisted upon going back for them, although Philip, who was one step farther down, tried to restrain him by holding his leg.

"It will be cold," said Alexander, who was very determined, and he pulled himself free, and crept back to their room, leaving Philip, very scared, upon the stairs. Philip could hear Granny and Uncle Ranny talking in the dining-room, and once there was the sound of a chair scraping on the floor. He was sure that Uncle Ranny was coming out. But almost immediately Alexander was back with the sweaters, and a moment later the twins found themselves safely outside the screen door and around the corner of the house.

"We must go across the field that way," said Alexander, pointing. "Then they can't see us from the dining-room. When we get to the woods it will be all right."

It was wet after the storm and the grass felt very cold against their ankles, as the twins scampered across the field toward the woods on the other side of the stone wall. They did not dare to look behind them and they expected every moment to hear the voice of Uncle Ranny who had a way, if the sunset were fine, of getting up from the supper table and going to the bay window to look out. The twins themselves seldom noticed sunsets but they were

afraid, from the evident glow behind them as they ran, that there was a fine one going on tonight.

They reached the edge of the field in safety, however, and clambered over the stone wall among the trees. Breathless, they sat down on the ground behind the wall to perfect their plans. Philip wished to eat one of the doughnuts at once but Alexander held tightly to the bag.

"We'll want them by-and-bye," he said. "We've got to walk a long way."

"How do we get to the road?" said Philip, looking a little nervously over his shoulder into the woods which seemed already rather forbidding in the summer dusk.

"We'll have to walk through the trees," said Alexander, who, when it came to doing things, was always more enterprising and unafraid than Philip, "until we come to the road where Polly took us. Then we can get to the highway."

"Do you think it will be very far on the highway?" asked Philip.

"Yes," Alexander replied, "sixty or thirty miles—but some one in a car will give us a ride, if we stand by the road and wave. So we'll get there tonight and then we'll come back in the morning."

"All right," said Philip. "Let's start now. It's getting dark."

But just as the twins got cautiously up on their knees to peer over the wall who should suddenly jump

up on it from the other side but Inky Winky, the little black cat which Polly had given to them.

The twins were horrified.

"We can't take *him!*" Philip was in despair.

"Go *home!*" said Alexander, clapping his hands hard.

But Inky Winky, soaked from his scamper through the grass, liked it on the dry wall and rubbed himself back and forth against the noses of the twins, purring cheerfully.

"Let's run like the dickens," said Philip, scrambling to his feet. "Perhaps we can get away from him."

So the twins ran as fast as they could in among the trees, not even noticing in what direction they were going, in their haste to leave Inky Winky behind. They ran until they were out of breath, and when at last they stopped and looked back, they were pleased to find that there was no longer any Inky Winky to be seen. But the woods had grown very dark.

"Which is the way to Polly's road?" faltered Philip.

"I guess it's this way," said Alexander, walking straight ahead.

"My sneaker's come off," said Philip, "and the flashlight won't work."

The twins stood close together in the now dark woods, and tried in vain to turn on the flash. Then they groped blindly around on the ground for the sneaker but they could not find it.

"I want to go home," said Philip, shivering.

"All right," agreed Alexander, and they both turned and walked in the opposite direction.

But the farther they walked, the thicker the trees seemed to become, and the more roots there were to stumble over. Alexander remembered the story of the Babes in the Wood, which Granny had read to them and clutched his bag of doughnuts more tightly. Once Philip walked directly into a tree and bumped his nose.

"When shall we come to a house or something?" said Philip, swallowing hard.

Just then the moon came out of the clouds, shedding a strange dim light among the trees—and there before them actually stood a house. It was small and perfectly dark, but it had a door and two windows, and a little platform at the front, on which stood several pails.

"It's the maple sugar house!" cried Philip, running up close to it, and thrusting his tongue out against it. "But it's not a bit sweet," he added, in a disappointed voice.

"It's just made of wood like any house," said Alexander, trying the latch of the door. "But we could go in and stay until it's light again—if nobody lives in it."

The door was unlocked and, lifting the latch, the twins tip-toed inside. Peering anxiously around, they saw by the moonlight that there was nobody there. It was a bare little room, with an unmade bunk under

the windows at each side, a rough chair and table, and a shelf on which stood a frying pan, a few plates and cups, and some rusty looking cans of provisions.

"You don't suppose a witch lives here, do you?" whispered Philip, remembering Hänsel and Gretel.

"No, I guess not," said Alexander, doubtfully. "We'll lock the door anyway."

When they had set the big hook into the staple, they walked cautiously across the room.

"I tell you what," suggested Alexander. "I can watch out of this window, and you can watch out of that one, and if we see a witch we can run out."

"But what if she comes up to the door?"

"We can jump out of the windows," said Alexander.

So they sat down on the bunks.

"I wish that branch or something didn't keep scratching on the roof," said Philip after a moment or two.

"I guess we'll be all right in here," said Alexander.

"Let's eat the doughnuts," suggested Philip.

"Perhaps there's preserve in some of those cans," said Alexander. "We could spread it on the doughnuts." He walked over to the shelf and succeeded, with the help of the chair, in taking down one of the cans. He carried it over to the window and they both peered anxiously at the label. Although the twins were not very good readers, they knew the word *jam* when they saw it, but the moon had gone under

a cloud and it was too dark to make out anything.

"We'll open it anyhow," said Alexander.

So he groped around again on the shelf until he found a can opener, and between them, with several bruised fingers, they finally managed to open the can.

"Oh, I know," said Philip, "it's salmon."

They both put their noses down and sniffed. Then they found a knife and spread the salmon on the doughnuts, sitting on the bunks where they could keep watch through the windows.

"It tastes funny, doesn't it?" said Philip.

"Sort of," agreed Alexander.

They munched in silence for a few minutes while the branch scritch-scratched across the roof and the dim light made queer shadows in the corners of the room.

"Look," said Philip suddenly, "there's something dark over there by that tree, and it's moving."

"What?" said Alexander, running across to Philip's window.

The twins pressed their faces against the panes and peered out, but the moon was still under a cloud, and they could not make out anything very distinctly. Something black, however, was certainly moving around among the tree stumps in the clearing.

"Shall we go out and see?" said Alexander doubtfully.

"*No,*" Philip replied decidedly.

"We'll both yell and scare it," suggested Alexander.

"No," said Philip. "What if it was a witch?"

"I don't believe in witches," said Alexander sturdily. "We'll throw something at it."

The twins looked around the dark room for a weapon.

"I know," said Alexander, "we'll throw the salmon can. We can open the window."

So the twins put their four hands on the window sash and pushed as hard as they could. After a minute it went up with a bang. The black thing out in the clearing jumped a little, and Alexander, leaning out as far as he could, threw the salmon can in the direction of the jump. He aimed well for immediately there was a yelp, but no witch went soaring off on a broomstick. Instead the black thing bounded away over the ground on four legs.

"It's a dog," said Philip, as the moon came out from under its cloud and showed the twins a big collie running for home, with its tail between its legs.

The woods, as far as they could see, were bright and empty again and the twins, greatly relieved, settled themselves once more for the night's watch. They lay on their tummies in the bunks, their square little faces propped on their hands, and looked out of the windows. It was cool and damp in the sugar house, and after a few minutes they put on their

sweaters. As soon as he was thoroughly warm Alexander, who was never agitated for very long, went to sleep.

Philip was sleepy too, sitting there staring through the glass into the moonlight. Sometimes it seemed as if the tree stumps were dancing up and down, and when they did that he opened his eyes wide again. He must not go to sleep, for fear something should come across the clearing. And he did not think that he did, even for a moment.

Nevertheless, it was Alexander who heard the Thing first.

"What's that?" said Alexander, suddenly sitting up in his bunk, not quite sure where he was.

"What's what?" answered Philip, opening his eyes.

"That thumpy sound. It's coming back."

Sure enough, in the direction of the clearing, something was coming through the woods, nearer and nearer to the sugar house—something that seemed in a great hurry and kept bumping the ground. It sounded exactly like the end of a witch's broomstick that had dropped too close to the earth. Philip and Alexander listened, wide-eyed with fright. The thumps went by in front of the sugar house and off among the trees again.

Alexander ran across to Philip's bunk and the twins looked anxiously out, but the moon had disappeared again behind heavy clouds, and they could see nothing in the blackness, not even the shapes of the trees.

As they sat there, huddled together, they suddenly heard the Thing coming back, scuttling across the clearing. Philip and Alexander lay down flat in the bunk and pulled their sweaters over their faces. This time Whatever-it-was came clattering up to the house itself, with a bang and a rattle right under their very window.

"Oh!" cried Philip.

"Ow!" cried Alexander.

At the sound of their voices, the Thing bumped hurriedly away through the clearing, and then all was silent again. Philip and Alexander, close together in the bunk, shivered and listened. Now and then they heard a distant thump, as if the Thing were coming back. But it did not, and after what seemed like hours there began to be a faint light in the sugar house. The twins could see the square outlines of the windows and the shapes of the table and chair. It was almost morning. Alexander had just sat up to look out of the window again, when from the back of the sugar house the Thing came swishing right out into the clearing before his eyes.

"Look!" he cried, with a gasp of astonishment, "Look!"

"Oh—*Oh!*" said Philip, who had sat up too.

For there in the middle of the clearing, revealed by the dawn, was no witch at all, but only their own little black Inky Winky with his head stuck fast inside the salmon can!

The twins ran quickly out of the sugar house into the clearing, and while Alexander held Inky Winky's little black legs, Philip gave one tug at the salmon can. The next minute Inky Winky, free at last, was scampering through the woods faster than any kitten had ever run before, the twins after him.

"Sh!" said Alexander, suddenly standing still, and pointing into the woods. "Somebody's coming. I hear them talking."

"Where?" said Philip, bumping into Alexander from behind, as he tried to stop too.

The twins stood listening, and looking in among the trees. The woods were still dim and scary in the strange gray light.

"Shall we go back to the sugar house?" said Philip.

"No," shouted Alexander all at once, running on into the woods. For he had recognized the voices and he knew that all was well!



Chapter Eight

POLLY PERPLEXED

"WHAT I want to know," said Randall, looking down severely at the twins, "is where you two were going. Speak up now!"

Philip and Alexander, their hands clasped squarely behind them, stood side by side before Uncle Ranny in the early morning woods. They were gazing apparently straight ahead of them at nothing at all, but they were really peeking out of the corners of their eyes at Polly who stood beside Uncle Ranny. It mattered a great deal to the twins what Polly thought, but as usual she was paying the scantiest attention to them. Instead, she was looking up at Uncle Ranny, with a sort of half smile that Philip and Alexander could not make out at all.

"We were going to Sanbornville," said Philip reluctantly, in a low voice, looking down at the toe of his stocking foot with which he was digging into the leafy mould.

"Sanbornville!" echoed Randall. "What *for?*"

"To tell the president about Polly," said Philip, his eyes still on the ground.

"What!" she exclaimed turning sharply from Randall to the twins. "About *me?*" For once they had fully captured Polly's attention.

"Yes," said Philip, looking up at her and finding fluent speech now that the ice was broken. "We lost our way and it got dark so we couldn't go last night, but we'll tell him in the fall. You needn't be afraid —he's a friend of ours and he'll like you too, won't he, Alec?"

Alexander nodded vigorously. Then with one accord the twins flung themselves upon Polly, clasping her arms with their firm little hands and jumping up and down.

"Say you'll come to college," begged Philip. "Oh, *please* say you'll come for sure!"

Polly threw back her head and laughed. Then she turned to Randall, and saw that for once she too had fully captured his attention, for he was looking at her with eyes unexpectedly searching.

"When I told them the other day that I might not go to Sanbornville this fall," explained Polly, still smiling, "and they wanted to know why, I said that the president might not like me—so they seem to have taken it into their own hands!" And she laughed again.

Randall glanced for a moment at the twins with a reluctant grin. Then he looked back intently at Polly.

"You're not coming to college?" he said.

"Probably not," replied Polly carelessly.

"But why *not?*" demanded Randall.

"Let's not talk about it just now," said Polly, turning away from him. "We ought to go home at once with the boys."

"Of course," said Randall, in his usual matter-of-fact voice. "Take hold of hands, you two, and walk ahead of us down the trail, and don't run, or get out of the path until you see the car."

The twins hesitated, for they wanted to walk with Polly. They looked up at her appealingly, but as soon as they saw her face they took hold of hands and started off dejectedly down the trail under the sugar maples, Philip limping a little without his sneaker.

Polly and Randall followed a short distance behind. For some minutes neither spoke. Randall was never much of a talker but their hours together in the shed laboratory had been filled with a sense of comradeship which had no need of speech. Now Polly felt a constraint in the silence.

Suddenly he turned to her.

"What do you mean about not coming to Sanbornville this fall?" he said, looking at her with something in his eyes that Polly had not seen there before.

"It may seem best for me not to," she said—and hesitated. "I'm thinking of taking an extra course or two at the Academy before I try college."



"Say you'll come to college," begged Philip.

"But you don't need anything more at the Academy," protested Randall, his thick brows drawn together in a slight frown. "You know more now than most entering Freshmen. Besides, I've got to have a student helper in the laboratory, and you're having practice this summer, you know."

"You'll find plenty of student helpers," she said, looking straight ahead, where the first shafts of the sun were lighting up the trunks of the trees. There was suddenly a glow all around them and the woods were sweet with the damp freshness of very early morning.

"But of course I want *you,*" said Randall simply, as if it were the most self-evident thing in the world.

He, too, looked down the trail and so did not see in Polly's face that which made it so unlike hers. But when, in a moment, he turned to her, it was the usual Polly with the mischievous crooked smile.

"Look out that you remember that a year from next fall, when I turn up at Sanbornville, Mr. Laboratory-Assistant Gage!" she said lightly. "Come on, let's catch up with the twins. They're almost out of sight." And she ran quickly toward the bend in the trail where Philip and Alexander were just disappearing.

Polly, slim and sure-footed, had always a certain grace of movement and Randall, watching her as she ran in gay abandon among the trees, her brown dress and green kerchief flickering in and out of the level

shafts of sunlight, thought that she seemed the very spirit of the woods.

He overtook her and the twins where the trail joined the wood road, where Flossie could be seen waiting by the gate. In a few minutes they had all reached the car and the twins had been bundled into the back seat, in spite of their indignant declaration that they always sat beside Polly. They were too subdued by their night's experiences, however, to make any real protest, and before Flossie had gone half a mile, they were sound asleep in a jumble of red sweaters and corduroys.

To Polly at the wheel, with Randall beside her, it seemed that this fresh day and the rain-washed deserted roads had been made just for their drive together—but it was, alas, only two miles to West Hill. Once she glanced around at Randall, but he did not look at her and his face wore the familiar expression of having forgotten her presence. Nevertheless, Polly felt this time oddly certain that their thoughts ran together, and just as Flossie began to climb West Hill she knew that they did.

"Polly," said Randall, with an odd mixture of casualness and earnestness in his voice. "You did not mean, did you, what you said about not coming to college this fall? It's nonsense, you know, your messing around at the Academy another year—unless, of course," he added, "you have some other reason."

There was a moment of silence.

"The truth is," said Polly, "my aunts are both unwell, and they just can't be left alone."

"Oh," said Randall, with a return of the puzzled frown, "but can't you—of course it is none of my business—but isn't there somebody else who could stay with them?"

"No," she said bluntly. The Stebbins reserve, where personal problems were concerned, was strong in Polly, and although his unexpected interest thrilled her, she already wished that she had not said so much. "I suppose I could go if I wanted to enough," she added evasively.

"*Don't* you want to?" said Randall.

"Sometimes," said Polly.

Randall said nothing more, and Polly wished, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, that the drive would come to an end.

In a moment it did, in front of the white cottage, where Mrs. Gage, pale and excited, came hurrying to meet them and was soon joyously reunited with the sleepy twins. Polly did not get out of the car.

"You've been a trump. Thanks a lot," said Randall, closing the door of Flossie. "See you to-morrow afternoon." He waved with his usual careless gesture; then turned toward the cottage.

Polly drove down the hill and along the still empty roads toward the Stebbins mansion, her mind in a tumult. Randall really wanted her to come to Sanbornville—he had said so—Randall, who almost never

committed himself! He was counting on her help in the laboratory, on having their work together go on. And oh, she wanted it too—more than she had ever wanted anything. Nobody had any right to make her give it up, said Polly fiercely to herself, holding her wheel tight. The duty to the aunts was no more hers than Debby's. Debby had had four years of freedom. It was her, Polly's, turn now.

If Debby only knew the conditions at home, she would surely have something to suggest, even if she could not come herself. Why, after all, should she not write to Debby and ask her advice? What right had Aunt Retta to dictate what she should or should not say to her own sister? Perhaps it was even her duty to tell Debby the real facts. And, anyway, there must be lots of older people who could take care of the old aunts better than a girl like herself. Why could not Aunt Martha, George's mother, come east and spend the winter at the Stebbins mansion? She was a widow, and she could bring Althea with her if necessary. But a moment later Polly smiled faintly to herself, in spite of her perplexities, for she was too much of a Stebbins not to know that Aunt Retta would never tolerate any outsider in the house for the entire winter, least of all Aunt Martha who was always late to meals and who on her last visit had spilled cleaning fluid on the top of one of the Chippendale tables.

It was not yet five o'clock as Polly brought Flossie

to a stop on the gravel behind the Stebbins mansion. She had telephoned the evening before that she was spending the night with Mrs. Gage, so that Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell should have no anxiety about her, but she had thought that somebody would surely be awake to let her in. There was no sign, however, that anybody was yet astir in the house and there was no possible way of getting in, as everything was thoroughly locked up at bed-time under Aunt Retta's personal supervision, and the only latch-key of the Stebbins mansion reposed invariably in the top drawer of Aunt Retta's bureau. Not wishing to wake Aunt Nell earlier than necessary, Polly stole around the outside of the house, examining the windows, to see if by chance one had been forgotten, but all were securely fastened, except the one in the shed, where Polly could always make an entrance.

She did so now, squeezing in under the upper sash, to the evident astonishment of the dozen sleepy kittens, who opened round eyes at this unexpected intrusion. Stretching themselves, they jumped from table, bench and chair, delighted at the prospect of an early breakfast. They did not know, as did Polly, that the door from the shed into the house was bolted every night from the other side, and that there would be no going into the kitchen until Aunt Nell came down.

Polly, feeling flat and disheveled after her sleepless night, sat down on the bench and picked up one

of the kittens that were sharpening their claws against her knees—the remaining yellow one that had introduced herself and Randall. Zab was to come over this morning to make a crate for it and it was to be shipped this afternoon. As she scratched the silky ears and looked down into the golden eyes, Polly suddenly wished that she had not sold this particular kitten. Would not that person in Boston be just as well satisfied with the gray one with the white nose? Polly put her face down against the yellow fur.

Then, quickly, she set the kitten on the floor and got up from the bench. What did it matter which kitten it was! And what in the world was the matter with *her!* Was she actually getting sentimental over cats—or was it just that she had had no sleep and no breakfast. She thought back to the ride with Randall through the dawn. Was it *she,* Polly Stebbins, who had felt all those queer things just an hour ago? Well, she must just get over them! She and Randall were the best of friends, and there was going to be nothing silly between them, *that* was sure. As for college—of course she wanted it—more than anything, but Randall was only a part of it. She would not give him another thought until she had had her breakfast and then things would assume their proper proportions again as they always did when you stopped being hungry. Meanwhile, Polly remembered that there was fresh milk on the back steps and

that she and the kittens could have some of that while they waited. She walked across the shed toward the outer door but Polly and the kittens were not to have the milk, for before she reached the door she made two discoveries, which for the time being put breakfast out of her mind again. The first was a note, stuck with a pin on the shed wall.

> DEAR POLLY (it read),
>
> Sorry, but I can't come over to-morrow to make the crate. Have another engagement and shall be away all day. Will come Thursday, sure. The stove is O.K. Fed the kits and put rest of fish in the ice chest.
>
> Yours,
>
> ZAB

Polly frowned at the note. Another engagement indeed! And for all day! What on earth was the matter with Zabbie? He knew well enough that the kitten had to be shipped today, and besides, they were out of slats for the crates and he had always fetched them from the lumber yard on the other side of the creek. Perhaps if Zabbie understood the chief reason for this cat business he would be a little more attentive to duty. Anyhow what kind of a date was he keeping?

Throwing the note on the table, Polly swung around toward the window that faced the Eatons' house but she could see no sign of life over there

either. As she turned from the window, she made her second discovery. The door at the opposite end of the shed that opened into the house was not bolted after all. From where she now stood, she could see that it was not even latched. For once the locking up had been neglected. But Polly did not stop to wonder why, for her sharp eyes had seen something else. Going quickly across the shed, she flopped around a large square of wood that was leaning against the wall. A faint color came into her cheeks as she looked at it. It was the sign that she and Zab had nailed to the oak tree.

So Aunt Retta had done it after all—it must have been last evening! Polly pushed the sign away from her into a corner. Well, that settled it. There simply was no doing anything in this house and anybody with a bit of spirit would get away from it. There certainly was nothing that would keep her, Polly, there after September.

Feeling more angry and determined than she had ever felt in her life, Polly slipped through the door into the hall, pushing back the disappointed kittens with the toe of her shoe. With lips set in a true Stebbins line, she went through the kitchen and the hall to the drawing-room. She would write to Debby at once, before Aunt Retta came downstairs, tell her the conditions at home and ask her what arrangements could be made at the Stebbins mansion

when she, Polly, should go to college. She opened the drawer of the old secretary where the writing paper was kept, but it was empty. This was annoying, because the supply of writing paper was upstairs in Aunt Retta's closet. Polly rummaged about for a moment or two in the secretary, then closed the drawers with a snap. Well, there was still a bit of old drawing paper in Debby's studio.

As she turned from the secretary, Polly's eye was caught by the portrait of Great-grandmother Stebbins over the mantelpiece. The sunlight, slanting in through the east window and falling on the Sheraton mirror on the opposite wall, was reflected back upon the picture, making it the one vivid and shining thing in the room. The beautiful serene face, the slender hands folded on the crimson lap, were all at once touched with animation. Great-grandmother had ever seemed a living presence in that room, but never so pervasive as at this moment in the clear reflected light. Polly, arrested, stood looking up into the dark eyes that seemed to be searching hers. Great-grandmother too had loved the world and all its adventures. Coming as a bride from her Spanish home in the West Indies, she had sailed with Great-grandfather on his journeys over the world in the clipper ship—even on that last dreadful journey when the ship had gone down with all on board. It was more than her name—Paulina de Cordova—that she had given to her great-granddaughter. Look-

ing into the gay and charming face, Polly felt suddenly very near to Great-grandmother, who had not wished to live out even her short life in a drab Maine town. Nor would *she*, said Polly decisively to herself, as she turned from the portrait. Nevertheless, her lips were no longer set in quite so tight a line. As she went through the hall she heard quick footsteps above.

"Is that you, Polly?" called Aunt Nell, leaning anxiously out over the stairs. "Have they found the boys?"

"Yes," replied Polly, "in the woods. They're all right."

As she spoke there was the familiar tapping of crutches along the upper hall.

"Well, I don't know what that Gage family can be like," announced the firm voice of Aunt Retta, "letting children slip through their fingers like that!" Then, coming closer to the stairs, "Polly," she demanded sternly, "how did you get in this morning? Did you take the latch key?"

"Oh no, Aunt Retta," said Polly, her mouth relaxing for a moment entirely, her eyes suddenly bright with their customary mischief. "The shed door happened to be unbolted, so I just walked in!"



Chapter Nine

MARKING TIME

POLLY did not write her letter to Debby before breakfast, and directly afterwards the day began to fill up with other things. While she was hanging out the dish towels on the back porch, she noticed Carol Eaton similarly engaged across the way. With a wave of her hand, Polly walked across the grass to the hedge that separated the two places.

"Is Zab in the garage?" she asked.

"No," said Carol, "he's gone."

"Gone?" echoed Polly in surprise, for it was not yet half past eight. "Where?"

"On the picnic to Shadman's Pond," said Carol. "It's such a long way that they got an early start."

"Who went?" enquired Polly, in as casual a voice as possible.

"Oh, Ned Abbott and Alice Crane and the Sill

boys—I've forgotten the others," replied Carol, turning toward the door. "Did you want Zab for anything?"

"No thanks," said Polly, a little abruptly, also turning away.

So the "engagement" was the picnic, to which Polly herself had declined an invitation! What was Zab going off with Ned Abbott and Alice Crane for? That was not his crowd at all. This would bear looking into, said Polly to herself, as she walked briskly back into the Stebbins mansion. Well, there was no time for investigation now, with Zab's work, as well as her own, to be done in the shed.

Polly fed the kittens and brushed them as usual with a stiff brush so that they should be silky and fluffy for possible customers—although who would come, now that the sign on the tree was gone? There was a printed card in the window of the Souvenir Shoppe, it was true, and another in the drug store, but Polly doubted whether they brought in much trade. Perhaps Bert Leary would stick one up for her, somewhere about the station. So she printed one and went in Flossie to fetch the slats. But the station was locked and Bert nowhere to be seen, although Polly waited, swinging the legs of her slacks from the baggage truck for fifteen minutes. And when she reached the lumber yard the man there was having an altercation with somebody over the telephone about shingles, so that there was

another tiresome wait, and the morning was half gone before Polly at last reached home with the slats.

She went to work at once on the crate, but although she was not unskilful with hammer and nails, she found that it took her much longer than it took Zab, and by the time the yellow kitten was boxed, lunch was ready on the table, and the letter to Debby had to be put off again.

Polly was anything but her usual cheerful self, as she sat stiffly at the luncheon table, saying as little as possible to Aunt Nell and nothing at all to Aunt Retta. Aunt Nell, always sensitive to the moods of others, looked questioningly at the dark young face opposite. Aunt Retta, herself unusually animated, appeared to notice nothing and was full of racy comment about a letter that she had just received from Aunt Martha Jones. Polly ordinarily loved to hear Aunt Retta on the subject of Aunt Martha, and at any other time would have been highly amused, but today the thought of the sign in the shed was too bitter and the sound of Aunt Retta's firm critical voice was almost more than she could bear. She rose from the table as soon as she could, and going directly to the shed, took the crate with the yellow kitten out to Flossie. She hesitated a moment before getting in, then turned and walked over to the pantry window where Aunt Nell was placing currant jelly glasses in the sun.

"Leave the dishes, Aunt Nelly," she said. "I shall be back in a little while."

She did wish that Aunt Nelly would not look so tired. But this day of delays had more in store and Polly did not think of Aunt Nell and the dishes again for several hours.

Arrived at the station, she was annoyed to find that Bert Leary had not yet returned from his dinner. In her haste to get away from the house and Aunt Retta, she had neglected to look at the clock. Stretching out behind the wheel, she prepared to wait in what comfort she could, but it was hot there by the station platform, with the early afternoon sun beating down on the roof of the car, and glancing at the crate beside her, she saw a small red tongue hanging out between the slats. She wished heartily that she had not had to ship the yellow kittens on such broiling days.

Polly leaned her head back against one of the uprights of the car and closed her eyes. It was funny, she thought drowsily, as she rubbed the yellow nose, how losing even a single night's sleep took the pep out of one. She must not drop off now though for it was almost time for Bert. Polly, however, was more tired than she realized, and in five minutes she was slumbering beside the yellow kitten, and dreaming elaborately that she and Randall had joined a circus and were trying to tame a cageful of lions by tickling their noses. Randall seemed to be coming toward her

with the fiercest lion of all on Aunt Retta's silver tea tray, when Polly suddenly opened her eyes with a start and saw Randall himself standing by the car, while behind him the afternoon train was just puffing out of the station.

"Good heavens!" cried Polly, clutching for the crate beside her. "The kitten!"

But the seat was empty.

"You looked so awfully comfortable," said Randall with a grin, "that it seemed a shame to wake you. I gave it to Bert."

"You did!" said Polly, still a trifle bewildered, and decidedly chagrined, for she was seldom caught napping. "Why—thanks a lot—but how did *you* happen to turn up at exactly the psychological moment?"

"I had to come down to send a telegram," said Randall. "It's a nuisance, but I've got to go back to Sanbornville to-morrow morning for a week or so."

"Oh," said Polly rather blankly. What a beastly day it was, to be sure.

It was as if Randall read her thoughts.

"By the way," he said, "could you come up today instead of to-morrow? The twins are in bed this afternoon—as a penalty—and later they and Mother are going to Thomaston to stay with Aunt Emma for a week, so we shall have a fine chance to work."

As he spoke, he looked in his detached way after the retreating train, and she noticed, half relieved, that

there was no trace on his face of his early morning mood.

"Yes, I think I could," she said, trying to sound merely acquiescent. "Is your car still at the garage? Shall we run up in Flossie now?"

"All right with *me*," said Randall, getting in beside her, and handing her the receipt for the kitten. "Pretty hot day for that little beggar in the crate," he added.

Did Randall too, perhaps, have a special feeling for the yellow kittens, thought Polly. She glanced at him as she started the engine but he was looking the other way, bowing to somebody across the street. She bit her lip. What in the world was the matter with her?

The afternoon that followed was the jolliest that Polly could remember. Sitting on opposite sides of the table under the window in the shed laboratory, she and Randall dissected lizards. Zab had caught them the day before along the river road and had taken them up to West Hill at Polly's behest. And now Randall showed her all sorts of interesting things that could be done with a scalpel.

"You must have dissected before, haven't you?" he said, watching her as, under his direction, she wielded the little knife.

"Not exactly," said Polly. "Sometimes I used to cut up the moles that Isaak Walton left on the doorstep, until Aunt Retta decided that it was unladylike!

There was a time, you know, when I intended to be a trained nurse."

"And you gave it up?" said Randall, with rather perfunctory interest.

"Yes," said Polly. "There's a little too much making of beds and being a comfort connected with it. After Aunt Retta broke her hip, I became a disillusioned woman!" And she looked up from her scalpel long enough to grin across the table.

"Pure science for you, then?" said Randall, with that quizzical look of which Polly was never quite sure.

"Yes," she answered, her eyes once more on the scalpel. She hoped that he would say something again about helping him next year, but when he spoke, it was in regard to the lizard.

"You'll do better," he said, "if you turn the head the other way, and hold the scalpel a little more to the side, like this."

Polly, in turn, watched the strong, sure fingers, as they separated the tiny parts and laid them cleanly out on the table. My, but it must be great to be able to do it like that! Would *she*—next year? Oh, if she only had the chance!

"I'll get the alcohol and labels," she said. Anything in the laboratory was fun—with Randall.

They stopped their work long enough to see Mrs. Gage and the twins off for Thomaston, but after that there were no interruptions and they spoke little.

Randall seemed absorbed in what he was doing and looked up only occasionally to give Polly brief directions across the table. As for Polly, she lost all track of time until, rinsing bottles in a basin by the open window, she suddenly remembered Aunt Nelly and the dishes, and heard the clock on the Congregational church striking the hour distantly across the fields.

"What time is it?" she said, whirling around from the window.

"Six," said Randall without looking up.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Polly, setting down the bottles with a clatter. "Supper!" She turned quickly toward the door, then stopped, remembering that Randall's family were not at home. "What about *your* supper?" she added.

"Oh, I'll just get a bite when I'm through here," he replied indifferently, going on with his work.

"No," said Polly, with one of her sudden inspirations. "You can come home with me."

"I don't think I'd better do that," said Randall doubtfully, looking up at last. "What about your aunts?"

"Oh, they'll enjoy it," said Polly blithely. "It's chowder tonight, so there's sure to be enough to go around. Hurry up and take off your smock and wash your hands. The only thing Aunt Retta *can't* stand is having any one late. I'll be turning the car around."

She did not add that nobody in the world but her-

self ever dreamed of bringing a last-minute guest to the table of the Stebbins mansion. Five minutes later, in spite of Randall's hesitations, they were rattling down West Hill at Flossie's topmost speed.

Miss Henrietta was standing at the screen door, looking out a little grimly, as Polly came up the walk with her unexpected guest.

"I've brought Randall to supper, Aunt Retta," she said gaily, opening the screen door. "I knew you would not want me to leave him to shift for himself. His family are all away, you know."

"Oh, indeed," said Miss Henrietta, obviously taken aback. "Good evening," she added stiffly, turning to Randall. "Will you come in. Supper is already on the table."

Aunt Nell was behind her in the hall, ready as usual with a quiet friendly greeting, and Aunt Retta, whatever her inward objections may have been, led the way without further words into the dining-room. The eyes under the handsome level brows were more than usually sharp and critical, but Polly noticed with inward glee that there was really nothing for Aunt Retta to criticize, for Randall's manners were above reproach. He pulled out Aunt Retta's chair and saw that she was comfortably settled with her crutches placed safely against the dresser. Then he turned to help Aunt Nell. But, once they were all seated, Polly had to admit that it was not an easy occasion. Aunt Retta made no effort to be either agreeable or enter-

taining, saying only the most necessary and perfunctory things, while Randall, though he listened with courteous attention, spoke hardly at all, thus leaving the brunt of the conversation to Polly and Aunt Nell. Once, when he glanced across the table, Polly saw in his eyes that look of whimsical understanding that she knew so well, but he gave the outward impression of being, as usual, curiously unaware of his surroundings. This did not at all please Aunt Retta, who liked nobody to seem unaware of the Stebbins mansion. Altogether, Polly did not feel that the supper was a success.

"That ship-model under glass," condescended Miss Henrietta with dignity, when Randall had helped her to rise from her chair, at the end of the meal, "was made by my father himself—an exact representation of his own clipper."

"Oh?" said Randall, giving the ship a polite, but casual, inspection, before turning to the darkest corner of the room, to examine with interest a stuffed otter. The otter, a relic of old Cousin Jonathan, was considered by Aunt Retta the least worthy object in the house and was only tolerated because it had been stuffed by a Stebbins, and had occupied the same spot for over sixty years. "That's a fine piece of taxidermy," observed Randall, passing by all the Chippendales and Hepplewhites, and even Great-grandmother's portrait, to assist Miss Henrietta into her chair at the other end of the drawing-room. Polly,

coming in with the tiny china cups on a tray, grinned a little ruefully.

"Randall and I won't stay for coffee, if you don't mind, Aunt Retta," she said, placing the tray on the table beside Miss Henrietta. "It's too nice outside."

Randall hesitated a moment by Aunt Retta's chair, then bowed politely to her and to Aunt Nell, and followed Polly across the room. As they came down the steps into the clear beauty of the midsummer evening, both Polly and Randall drew an audible breath of relief. Then they looked at each other and laughed.

"Let's pitch quoits," said Polly, picking some rings up from under the portico, and walking across the lawn toward a low stake. Polly must ever be doing something.

The air was sweet with the new-mown hay in the Judge's fields across the road, and the clear gold in the west seemed to turn the grass under the Stebbins elms to an almost unearthly green. Randall, watching Polly as she tossed the quoits with slim and easy grace, felt again the illusion of the early morning—except that now she seemed to him the spirit of the fields.

They played until the daylight was almost gone, and Polly thrilled to find how evenly matched they were, though Randall beat her by a point. It was not until he had said that he must go and had been into the house to say goodnight to the aunts, that the exhilaration went out of the day.

"You needn't bother to run me home," he said, as he came back down the walk to where Polly stood waiting. "I'll pick up my car at the garage." Then, as he put his hand on the gate, "Oh, by the way," he said, "I had a letter today from a last year's student, applying for that place in the laboratory. You know what I said this morning. Well, that holds good. But in case you aren't coming to college, I don't want to lose this chance, because she's rather a cracker-jack. So will you think it over, and let me know as soon as I get back next week? I ought to settle it then." Polly could see only the outline of his face in the dusk, but his voice sounded very cool and detached.

"If you're in a hurry," she replied, trying to sound every bit as cool, "perhaps you'd better not wait for me."

"Oh yes I will," said Randall, in the same voice. "Thanks for the supper and for all your help. See you next week." And opening the gate, he waved his hand, and disappeared down the hill under the shadows of the elms.

Well, if he preferred that other girl, said Polly to herself, her head held high as she went back up the walk, he should just have her! As she came into the house, she saw that Aunt Retta was on the stairs, going slowly up on her crutches, attended by Aunt Nell. At the sound of the screen door closing, Miss Henrietta stopped and half turned.

"I hope that another time, Polly," she said, "you

will let us know when you wish to bring people to supper. As I have told you before, I do not like unexpected guests for meals, especially slight acquaintances."

"I know Randall very well," retorted Polly quickly, "and I thought that you would enjoy knowing him better too."

Miss Henrietta raised her eye-brows.

"The young man does well enough," she said, with an involuntary glance in the direction of the dining-room door, which concealed Cousin Jonathan's otter, "but he has a great deal to learn."

"I don't know what you mean, Aunt Retta," said Polly, with unexpected vehemence. "Randall has learned more already than most people learn in a lifetime."

"*Well!*" said Miss Henrietta, looking down at Polly in evident surprise. "We will say no more about it. Will you please lock the front door now. Then Aunt Nell will not have to come down again."

Miss Henrietta, still poised upon the stairs, watched while Polly pushed the bolt. Then, with a somewhat stiff *goodnight,* she turned and continued her slow progress up the long flight.

Polly, her back against the door, her thin face set in its sharpest lines, watched her aunts until they disappeared around the curve at the top of the stairs. Then she walked straight into the drawing-room. The letter to Debby should be written without another moment's delay.



Chapter Ten

SOMEBODY MAKES A BREAK

SITTING by the drop-light at the secretary, in the otherwise dim old drawing-room, Polly wrote her letter with characteristic directness.

DEAR DEBBY (she began),

There is something I should have told you ever so long ago, except that Aunt Retta did not wish it mentioned. But now that you are not coming home for another whole year, I think you ought to know that Aunt Retta fell and broke her hip last winter and has been on crutches ever since. It set pretty well and she insists that she is improving, but Aunt Nell thinks that she will always be lame, and so do I.

The reason I am writing this just now is that

I am awfully worried about what we ought to do—I mean as to what arrangement can be made when I go to college in September. They simply ought not to be left alone in this house, for Aunt Nell is not very well either (nothing serious, only she gets tired easily), and she mustn't go up and down stairs all the time. You know Aunt Retta—how she will *not* have outsiders living in the house. She made a dreadful fuss about the nurse last winter, and she won't even have Jennie sleep here once in a while. But there *just must* be somebody with them when I go away. Of course it can't be Aunt Martha. The air of the Stebbins mansion would be a perpetual electric blue! You should have heard them last summer—it was rich! But can you think of any one else? Of course I know *you* feel that you cannot come, but do you suppose if you wrote to Aunt Retta that you and Eric think they should not stay alone, perhaps it might do some good? I could be here week-ends, but I don't see how I can give up college entirely. It means too much in every way.

Write as soon as you can what you think we can do.

Always with love,

POLLY

She stamped the envelope, and rose quickly from her chair. The letter should go into the mail-box tonight, before she had time to change her mind. But as she turned toward the door she paused, for there was still the sound of crutches moving about

in the room overhead. It would probably be better to wait until Aunt Retta was quite settled for the night. Nobody was supposed to unlock the front door after it had once been safely bolted under Miss Henrietta's supervision.

As she stood by the secretary, her letter in her hand, waiting for the house to be quiet, Polly heard a motor in the Eatons' driveway, the slamming of a car door and the sound of jolly voices saying good-night. It must be Zab coming home from the picnic. Goodness, but it had lasted long enough! And whose large car was that? Switching off the drop-light, so that she herself should not be seen, Polly looked across at the Eatons'. She could not distinguish the voices through the closed window, but she could distinctly see the slouching figure of Zab, standing on the steps in the moonlight and waving to the big sedan as it backed out of the driveway. He did not move until the car had disappeared under the elms of the street, then turned and bent to fit his latch-key in the door. Polly half smiled to herself. Fancy Zabbie looking after somebody sentimentally in the moonlight! Who could it be? Then her face grew suddenly sober, as she thought of another occasion when she had caught herself looking after Randall—Randall—who was considering that other girl for the laboratory. Well, who cared? She turned quickly from the window and listened. There was no longer the sound of crutches tapping on the ceiling. The

house seemed deathly still as she tip-toed into the dark hall and drew the heavy bolt of the front door.

The letter safely in the box by the gate, Polly went wearily up the long stairs to her room. Did the world always look so distorted, she wondered, when for twenty-four hours one had been almost without sleep. Sleep! All she wanted was to tumble into bed and forget everything—college and the kittens and Aunt Retta and Randall—yes, most of all, Randall. What an idiot she had been to let herself care about the laboratory work. It was clear from the way he had spoken tonight that the other girl would suit him every bit as well. In spite of what he had said this morning in the woods (*was* it only this morning, or was it a month ago?) in spite of all that, it apparently did not much matter to him *who* his assistant was. Well, she would never think again, if she could help it, of this morning in the woods. She hated that sort of thing—*hated* it—and it was not going to come in and spoil her life, *ever*. Polly switched off the light with a snap and five minutes later she had forgotten everything in sleep.

It was a deep dreamless sleep of complete exhaustion, so that when, several hours later, she suddenly found herself sitting up in bed staring into the semi-darkness of the big room, she hardly knew where she was. In front of her the long slender posts of her bed reared toward the ceiling, and beyond, in the pale moonlight on the floor, she could see the familiar

pattern of the braided rug. Polly rubbed her eyes. What had made her wake up now? She always slept until morning, but from the direction of the moonlight coming in through the window, she felt sure that it must be several hours before daylight. Had somebody called? It almost seemed that just before she opened her eyes she had heard something. She listened intently, but the house was very still. No, what was that faint scrapy sound from somewhere outside? Was somebody trying to steal Flossie from the driveway?

In an instant Polly, wide awake, had sprung out of bed and run quickly across the room. Flossie, however, could be seen standing unmolested in the moonlight. Then it came over Polly that she might have neglected to lock the front door again, when she came in from putting the letter in the box, and that somebody was perhaps trying to break into the house. No, she was almost sure that she had slipped the bolt. Standing at the window, partly hidden by the curtain, she held her breath and listened again. The stillness was almost uncanny—not a squeak on the stairs within, or a rustle in the garden without. Then suddenly Polly heard it once more, that faint scraping of something close to the house, apparently near one of the downstairs windows below her room. She could not lean out to investigate because of the screen and she dared not speak for fear of arousing the aunts

who were both light sleepers. The sound continued for a few minutes, then stopped, only to begin again more persistently. By this time Polly had fully convinced herself that somebody was trying to break into the house. Ever since she was ten Polly had been secretly hoping for the excitement of a burglar at the Stebbins mansion, and she had long ago devised a program for the occasion.

Slipping into her dressing gown and taking her flashlight from the table, Polly stole out into the hall. With the utmost caution she crept down the stairs, stepping over all the familiar creaks and pausing at the bottom only long enough to lift carefully down from its rack beside the hall clock one of the brace of old pistols that had hung there since before Great-grandfather Stebbins' time. They had been entirely innocent of bullets for fully seventy years, but Polly, feeling the cold steel in her hand as she went on down the hall, felt armed to the teeth.

She was sure that the scrapy sound had come from the pantry window, but here in the lower hall she could no longer hear anything. Pausing again outside the closed kitchen door, she listened intently; then turned the knob slowly and opened the door a few inches. Yes, there it was again in the pantry, as she had thought—only now it was no longer a scrape but the sound of a window being pushed stealthily open. Flinging the door wide, Polly aimed

her pistol and her flashlight in the direction of the pantry.

"Hands up!" she cried, in as deep a voice as she could muster.

The flash fell only on the partly closed pantry door, but at the sound of Polly's voice there was a crash and a muffled cry of despair. Whatever was in there had apparently fallen over Aunt Nell's currant jelly glasses. Polly switched on the electric light and still pointing the pistol at the pantry, marched straight across the kitchen and pulled the door wide.

"Great Scott!" cried the voice, no longer muffled. "Put down that gun, Polly!"

It was George! And he was just half way through the pantry window.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Polly sternly, regarding the wreck in the pantry.

George, his white flannels liberally smeared with the currant jelly, wriggled the rest of the way through the window.

"I got in late from Rockland," he explained hastily. "I didn't want to disturb you people, so I thought I'd try that jimmy that used to open this window. It's damp on the boat at night, you know," he added, as Polly continued to look at him accusingly.

"Well, is that any reason for scaring a houseful of women to death," she retorted, blocking the doorway, and concealing as best she could her thorough enjoyment of the whole adventure. "Besides, break-

ing and entering is a pretty serious offense, young man."

"Oh, come on, Polly," said George, who by this time had scrambled into an upright position. "Let me into the kitchen."

Suddenly Polly grinned. George did look awfully rumpled and funny, with a blob of currant jelly on the end of his nose. Besides, it occurred to her that not twenty-four hours ago she herself had been trying unsuccessfully to break into the house and Polly could always laugh at her own expense.

"You're a scamp," she said, dropping her arms, which had barred his way into the kitchen, "but if you'll be as quiet as the grave, I'll let you in."

"Gee whiz, Polly," began George, as he followed her into the room, "where in time did you get that murderous gu——"

"Sh-sh!" said Polly, standing suddenly still in the middle of the kitchen, her finger on her lips, her eyes on the ceiling.

There was the distinct sound of footsteps on the floor above.

"*Now* you're in for it!" said Polly. "Stay where you are, while I go upstairs. If it's only Aunt Nell, it will be all right."

But as she went toward the door, there was the ominous sound of crutches, tapping with unwonted speed along the upper hall, then a heavy thud and a cry.

"Good heavens! Aunt Retta's fallen! You *have* done it now, you crazy thing," cried Polly, rushing for the stairs, with George close behind.

Arrived, breathless, at the top, they saw Aunt Nell bending over Aunt Retta, who was struggling to get to her knees. Her face was very white, and her lips were set tight against the pain which she would not express. Polly flew to pick up the crutches which had slid in opposite directions, while George did what he could to help Aunt Retta to her feet.

"I don't believe I can stand," she said, in a shaky voice, so unlike Aunt Retta's that it sent a pang through Polly. The sight of this figure, usually so proud and erect, prostrate and helpless, made the upper hall seem suddenly a strange place to them all.

Between them they managed somehow to get Aunt Retta back to her bed where she lay exhausted against the pillows, her eyes closed.

"I think, Polly, that you would better telephone for Dr. Hill," said Aunt Nell, in a low voice.

But it was not low enough. The eyes in the bed opened wide for a moment as sharp and bright as ever.

"I will *not* have the doctor here in the middle of the night," said Aunt Retta, in her own positive way. "I shall be—quite myself in the morning. Get me a hot water bag, please, Polly, and a cup of coffee. Do you understand—I will *not* have Dr. Hill telephoned to now." Then, with her hand against her

hip and an involuntary moan, Aunt Retta closed her eyes again.

Polly stole out of the room, leaving Aunt Nell sitting by the bedside. In the hall outside was George, moving awkwardly and restlessly about, his handsome face full of trouble.

"How is she, Polly?" he asked anxiously.

"We don't know," replied Polly, rather coolly, walking past him toward the stairs. "She won't have the doctor until morning."

George followed Polly to the kitchen, where she went swiftly about, putting on the hot water and making the coffee, but paying no further attention to him.

"Can I do anything to help?" he ventured after a few minutes.

"Yes," said Polly. "Somebody will have to clean up that mess in the pantry and I suppose it might as well be you."

George walked obediently across the kitchen and fetched the dust-pan and brush, with which he went silently to work. He swept up the broken glass, and mopped the splatterings of currant jelly as best he could. Then he came back to the table, where Polly was pouring out the coffee.

"I say, Polly," he began, "I'm awfully sorry. I didn't think of anything like this. I don't know just what to say, but——"

"Don't say anything," replied Polly shortly. "The

trouble with you is, you always think too late. Even if she hadn't fallen and hurt herself, you know well enough how Aunt Retta would feel about having a window of the Stebbins mansion opened with a jimmy. Sometimes I think you haven't any more sense than you had when you were fifteen. Why, even Zabbie would know enough not to play a silly trick like that. The bed's made up in the guest room. If that's what you came for, you'd better go up and get into it." And sticking the hot-water bag under her arm, and lifting the cup of coffee with a steady hand, Polly marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

A few minutes later Aunt Retta, raised on an extra pillow, and feebly sipping her coffee, suddenly put down her spoon.

"What is George doing here?" she demanded, evidently just beginning to be fully aware of the scene in the hall. "How did he get in?"

"I happened to hear him," said Polly, "and went down. He arrived late in his boat."

"Then *that's* what I heard," said Aunt Retta. "Are you sure you locked the door again?"

Polly, who was always truthful, hesitated. Then, remembering that she had indeed been out earlier in the night with the letter,

"Yes," she said.

"Well," said Aunt Retta, "I don't like midnight arrivals. Tell George I want to see him."

"I think he has gone to bed," replied Polly, relenting for a moment towards Georgy-Porgy, "I'll tell him in the morning."

Aunt Retta, spent by this exertion, said no more, merely holding out the cup for some one to take, and wearily closing her eyes again. They made her as comfortable as possible for the night. Then Aunt Nell sent Polly to bed.

"There is nothing you can do until we get the doctor in the morning," whispered Aunt Nell. "I will call you if I need you."

Polly tip-toed out of the room, noticing as she went down the hall that the door of the guest-room was open only a crack. George must have followed her directions and gone to bed.

But once in her own four-poster, Polly, tired as she was, found that she could not sleep. She turned from side to side, haunted by that scene in the hall—Aunt Retta crumpled and helpless on the floor, her pitiful crutches strewn about. What would they have done if they had been alone in the house, those two? No, *of course* she could not leave them. It was *her* business, and nobody else's. What, after all, did it matter to anybody whether she went to college this year or next—least of all, apparently, to Randall. And what would Debby say when she got that letter—that selfish letter? Whatever she might *say*, she would be sure to *think* that she had a sister who could not play the game. Debby herself, thought Polly, had

always played the game. As Aunt Retta had said more than once, Debby was a true Stebbins. Polly had always smiled when Aunt Retta had said that, but after all, it *was* something to be a true Stebbins. Polly, tossing in her bed, told herself bitterly that *she* was not and that Debby when she received that letter, would know it too.

Suddenly she sat up in bed. Why, that letter had not gone yet! It was still safely there in the mail box, where she could get it again and destroy it. Polly slipped out of bed and groped around for her dressing gown. Then she paused. No, she could not go out there tonight, with the aunts awake in the front room, but Henry Gill almost never came around before seven in the morning and she should be up long before that. Having opened her door and listened to make sure that all was quiet in Aunt Retta's room, Polly crept back to bed. With a sigh of relief she closed her eyes. The first thing in the morning, she repeated drowsily to herself, she would retrieve the letter. Then she went peacefully to sleep—and had no dreams at all of what was really in the mail box.

Chapter Eleven

ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

WHEN Polly opened her eyes, the sun was streaming brightly in through her east window. Was it a knock on the door that had waked her? Gracious, she must have overslept! With a vague sense of panic that there was something for which she had been going to get up early, she sat up in bed and blinked at the clock. Seven! The letter in the mail box! She jumped out of bed just as the knock on the door was repeated.

"Polly," said the voice of Aunt Nell, "will you please go down as soon as you are dressed and telephone for Dr. Hill? Aunt Retta is still in a good deal of pain and I think she should see him at once."

As quickly as possible Polly slipped into her clothes and ran downstairs, noticing in surprise, through the crack of the guest-room door as she went by, that the bed had not been slept in. What had become of Georgie-Porgie? The telephone was in the back hall, so that Polly could not watch the mail-box while

she called up, but through the open door of the dining-room she could see a strip of road along which Henry Gill would come. With her eyes glued to this spot, she stood, the receiver at her ear, waiting for her connection. It seemed to her that the local operator had never been so stupid and so slow. "What's the *matter* with you this morning, Sadie?" said Polly, impatiently jiggling the hook up and down. "Did Bill take you to the movies last night?" Once she thought that she saw Henry Gill's Ford coming along the road, and all but dropped the telephone. But it was only a belated milk truck. At last she heard Dr. Hill's placid kind old voice at the other end of the wire. Miss Henrietta had fallen? Dear, dear. He would be up at once. With a hasty "Thanks a lot" Polly slammed down the receiver and rushed for the front door and the mail box.

As she pulled down the flap and saw the envelope inside, a wave of relief swept through her. But as soon as she touched it, she realized that it was not her letter to Debby. The unsealed envelope was an old one directed to George, with Polly's name scribbled over it in pencil, and it contained, as she saw at once by a glance at the scrawl inside, a note from that culprit himself. Henry Gill must have come early after all. The letter to Debby was gone beyond recall.

Appalled, Polly stood for a moment very still by the mail box, George's note forgotten. Oh, *why* had

she not come out last night? She might have known that she would over-sleep after all that excitement. Now it was too late. Debby would know just what a quitter she could be! Her face was dark with chagrin as she walked slowly back to the house. It was not until she reached the steps that she remembered the envelope in her hand, and took out George's note. As her eye ran down the page, her brows drew together in a frown, and the chagrin gave way to a look of acute annoyance. The note was scribbled on a sheet of crumpled paper (evidently from George's pocket, as there was a smear of currant jelly on one corner), and this is what she read:

DEAR POLLY,

I think I'll go back and sleep on the boat. I'm awfully cut up about what happened, and hope you'll forgive me. You know how I feel about you, Polly, and that I'd get down on my knees if it would do any good. Some day I'm going to get down on my knees anyway, and if you don't smile at me and take me, I'll run away with you. You're *sweet*—and that's that.

Yours forever,

GEORGE

P.S. I hope Aunt Retta will be O.K.

Polly, her eyes unnaturally bright, crumpled the note in her hand. Idiot! *Sweet,* was she? His forever! Run away with her, indeed! Well, Mr. George would just better try it once. And if he knew what

was good for him, he would certainly stay away from the Stebbins mansion for a while. Polly closed the screen door with a snap and walked briskly toward the back of the house to put the offending note in the stove. But before she reached the kitchen she had reconsidered, and with a flicker of returning mischief in her face, she put it into her pocket instead. She would save it, and some time perhaps Georgie might have to eat his words. Then, her face once more sober, Polly set out Aunt Retta's tray and began to get the breakfast.

Before it was on the table Dr. Hill arrived, and with a nod and a pat for Polly went directly upstairs to Aunt Retta's room. Polly, on the top step in the hall outside, awaiting the verdict and nursing the dull ache within her, was very miserable. Of course she could write to Debby again and take back what she had said. She could assert that she did not after all mind much about giving up college—but it would not be true, said Polly wretchedly to herself, her head in her hands. She *did* mind, terribly, and she despised people who said things and then took them back the next day. Besides, if Debby heard that Aunt Retta was bed-ridden again, she would think that it had taken something as bad as that to make Polly see what she ought to do. *Would* Aunt Retta have to be put to bed again for months and months? she thought, with a fresh pang of misery.

She got up with an impatient gesture, and stood



Polly, on the top step, was very miserable.

listening. Aunt Retta certainly sounded more like herself this morning. Polly could hear the deep tones of Dr. Hill and an occasional few quiet words from Aunt Nell, but it was the strong positive voice of Aunt Retta that predominated behind the closed door. Polly could not distinguish what they were saying, and remembering, with a wry smile, the many times through the years when Aunt Retta had told her that she must *not* be an eavesdropper, she turned again towards the stairs. As she did so, the door of Aunt Retta's room opened and Dr. Hill came out with Aunt Nell behind him. Polly followed them downstairs and into the drawing-room where Dr. Hill repeated his verdict. Miss Henrietta had not broken anything, or seriously injured the hip, but she was badly bruised and shaken up and would probably have to be kept in bed, or at any rate on her couch, for two or three weeks.

Aunt Retta in her room on any terms meant stirring days for the rest of the household as Polly very well knew. For nothing was permitted to break the routine of the Stebbins mansion, and she and Aunt Nell would have felt that Aunt Retta was sick indeed, if she had not continued to direct things from upstairs.

"It is Friday," said Miss Henrietta, when, the doctor gone, she had had her coffee and toast, and had been settled for the morning with pillows and hot compresses, "and if you will bring up the books,

Polly, I will let you help me with the accounts."

"Don't you think you would better put it off a few days, until you feel stronger?" suggested Polly, looking at the white drawn face against the pillow.

"It is not the Stebbins way to put off things that should be done," said Miss Henrietta firmly.

Polly turned from the bed. It seemed to her that Aunt Retta's sharp eyes were looking directly through her, and noting how little a true Stebbins she was.

After the accounts were put in order, the silver cake basket and tea service were brought up to Aunt Retta's room and polished under her supervision, for these were never left to Jennie in the kitchen. Then the linen on the shelves had to be counted, as it always was on Fridays after the laundry came back, and the set of Chinese lacquer on Aunt Retta's mantel-piece had to be dusted with a horse-hair brush. It seemed to Polly that Aunt Retta had never been so ingenious in thinking up things that must be done and it was eleven o'clock before Polly had time to so much as look into the shed. Then she found that Zab, whose week it was to attend to the kittens in the morning, had not been over at all, as was evident by the way in which they all came mewing to greet her, their little red mouths wide with impatient hunger. Zab was certainly "letting Polly do it" with a vengeance! As she went back and forth in the shed, getting the kittens their belated breakfast, and glancing occasionally through

the window, her eye fell on the words painted so flamboyantly on the back of Flossie, and she was filled all at once with a great distaste for this childish display. What was the use of driving about town, asking other people to let you attend to their business, when you hadn't the common decency to attend to your own?

With one of her sudden impulses, Polly walked across the shed to the shelf, and took down the can of paint with which she had renovated Flossie at the beginning of the summer. Then walking out to the car, she rapidly obliterated the white words, with sweeping strokes of the black paint. At least, said Polly to herself, as she put on the finishing touches, she would not now feel like a hypocrite. She was still dabbing at Flossie with the brush, when Zab came around the corner of the shed. At the sight of Polly he stopped short, obviously embarrassed.

"Well," said Polly, with only a glance in his direction. "What have you got to say for yourself *now?*"

"I'm awfully sorry," said Zab, hesitating, "but I had an appointment for right after breakfast."

"Another picnic?" said Polly, with slightly raised eyebrows. "By the way, who brought you home last night?"

Zab, evidently taken aback by this turn in the conversation, looked still more ill at ease.

"I came home in the Daggetts' car," he said, shuffling a little on his big feet.

Polly looked up now in genuine astonishment.

"The Daggetts'?" she repeated. "I didn't know that Herman Daggett could get away from the dairy for all day."

"He didn't," said Zab. "He—he just came after us."

"After whom?" continued Polly relentlessly.

"Oh, Alice Crane and the Sills and me, and—and one or two others."

"How funny of Herman!" said Polly, with a puzzled half grin. "But see here, Zabbie," she continued, in a firm voice, "you have just got to attend to business more faithfully. I depend on you, and you don't come. Aunt Retta is sick in bed this morning, and the kittens never were fed until just now."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Zab, but not, Polly thought, in quite his usual tone of penitence. "I'm glad to help you, but after all, Polly, I don't know why I should *have* to come over and feed your cats."

If the heavens had fallen, there, on the Stebbins driveway, Polly could not have been more astonished. What had come over her faithful servant? Had the moment arrived when she should have to tell him what all this cat business was for? No, she decided, not yet.

"I thought you liked it when we worked together," she said, smiling suddenly at him in a way that Zab had never been able to resist. But for once he was not looking at her. He was staring into space, and

he had drawn his thick red eyebrows together, as he always did when he found speech difficult.

"I've got to tell you something, Polly," he burst out suddenly. "I can't help you with the kittens any longer. I've found another job."

"Another job?" echoed Polly, "Where?"

"Mr. Daggett has asked me to work for him over at the farm for the rest of the summer," explained Zab. "It's a regular all-day job. He's going to help me to learn the dairy business, and if I don't get to the Agricultural School in the fall he may keep me on all winter. It's a swell chance, Polly, and I'll be earning money to help me another year." And his red face suddenly glowed with happiness—a happiness that had nothing whatever to do with her, Polly. For the first time she felt that she was not in the least important to Zab.

"Why—that's fine, Zabbie," she said slowly. "When do you start?"

"To-morrow," said Zab, eager to talk, now that his confession was over. "That's what I was doing this morning. Herman told me last night that his father wanted to see me about something important, so I went over right after breakfast. He took me all over the farm. I didn't have time to attend to the kittens, truly I didn't, Polly."

"That's all right," replied Polly, hardly knowing what she said. "I'm glad you've had a stroke of luck, Zabbie."

Then she picked up the can of paint and turned toward the house. She felt that she wanted to get away somewhere by herself.

"But I'll have the rest of the day," said Zab, following her, with a return of his old faithfulness, "and I'll be glad to do anything you want me to."

"Well, you might make another crate or two, if you don't mind," said Polly, in an indifferent voice, "so that I can have them on hand."

Then she walked into the shed, and, having replaced the paint, went on into the house and through the hall to Debby's little workshop. There she sat down as usual on the old chest, her hands behind her head, her head against the wall, to think things over. So Zabbie was throwing her overboard—just like *that*. Of course it was a good opportunity for him, and of course he did not know that the money they were earning together was—but he did not act as if he really cared whether he went on helping her or not. Zabbie—George—Randall—none of them to be counted on. And now, when that letter reached its destination she would lose Debby's respect.

Polly bit her lip. For the first time in her life she felt very sorry for herself. This, however, was a mood so foreign to Polly's nature that it could not last. In a few minutes she rose from the chest, her head erect, the old self-reliant tilt to her chin. Of all the despicable people in the world, she told herself, those who were sorry for themselves were the worst.

What was it Aunt Retta had said about its not being the Stebbins way to rebel at the inevitable? Well, she, Polly, would show that she was a Stebbins too. She would not let herself count on anybody again—*anybody*. She would depend wholly on herself. That was the only sure way—the Stebbins way. She would make a real go of the kitten business, single-handed. Until this summer, life had always been fun—well, it should go on being fun. Almost cheerful again, Polly strode out into the hall. As she did so the telephone bell rang.

"Hello," she said, taking up the receiver. "Oh, hello, Neddie— What, this afternoon?—Yes, I'm almost sure I can— All the way to Black Harbor? —Oh, that would be great! What do you mean, how do I happen to be so enthusiastic all of a sudden?" Polly laughed merrily into the transmitter, "Well, why shouldn't I want to go? It's a dandy day for a trip, isn't it?—Don't be a goose, now! Remember, no sweet nothings on the boat this afternoon, or I'll swim ashore— Right-oh— Two thirty at the float— 'By."

Polly hung up the receiver. Well, at least there was Neddie left. And she could always manage Neddie.



Chapter Twelve

MORE CATS FOR POLLY

In the days that followed Polly found that, try as she would, there was not quite so much fun to be had out of life as usual. She could always, to be sure, go yachting with Ned, who let no day pass without calling up on the telephone. But, although the motor-boat was jolly, one could have a bit too much of Neddie. Besides, while Aunt Retta remained in her room there were countless things to be done about the house and even when at the end of two weeks Miss Henrietta insisted upon coming cautiously downstairs again upon her crutches, Polly found that her aunts still needed all the help that

she could give. Every day she realized more clearly how much they depended upon her, and thought with fresh misery of that wretched letter to Debby. She must, she supposed, write again and somehow take back what she had said. But what would be the use? Long before Debby could receive any words of contrition she would have already made up her mind about the sister whom she had not seen for four years. And until Debby's suggestions arrived there was no sense in opening the subject of college with the aunts. Instead of looking eagerly forward to Debby's letters, Polly found that she began to have a dread of their arrival, which was foolish of course because it would be weeks, fully the middle of August, before she could look for an answer to her letter. But all Debby's accounts of their happy Italian life, all her affectionate interest in what was going on at the Stebbins mansion, seemed to send a renewed pang through Polly and she was glad when she found nothing at all in the mail box.

One day, about a week after Aunt Retta's accident, she found a postal card from Randall saying that he was starting for University of Chicago on business connected with his work next year and that he could not tell how long he would be away. He did not know when his mother and the twins would come back from Thomaston, but doubtless they would let Polly know when they needed her. That was all, no mention of the laboratory position, no

word to show that he felt any regret that their summer work together was given up, and the card was signed, "Yours truly, Randall Gage." Her lips set tight, Polly walked directly to the kitchen and, this time, dropped her missive into the stove. So their friendship was nothing to him! She would *not* let herself think about him any more. And she put the lid back on the stove with a bang that made Jennie in the pantry jump.

But Polly discovered that it was one thing to say that she would not think of Randall Gage and quite another to keep her resolution. Every time that she took the potato parer out of the kitchen drawer she was reminded of scalpels, whenever she frolicked with the kittens her mind went back to the yellow fluffballs among the buttercups, and once, when she saw a lizard in the grass, she bit her lip so hard that it hurt.

And Polly missed her merry afternoons with the twins. One day she passed them, driving with their grandmother and aunt along the Thomaston road. She waved gaily to them from Flossie, and Philip and Alexander, leaning from the window with shouts of joy, almost decapitated themselves in their effort to see Polly again. But the days went by and nobody came back to live at the white cottage, although every night when Polly went up to bed, she looked through the front window of the upper hall,

to see if by chance there were lights twinkling again over on West Hill.

"How far we can see when there is a moon," said Aunt Nell one evening, looking over Polly's shoulder.

Did Aunt Nelly, who understood so many things, suspect her of being sentimental about the house where Randall lived, thought Polly, with a faint shudder. After that she was careful not to let herself look out of that particular window.

It seemed funny, too, without Zab. During all the years that Polly had lived in Bellport there had been hardly a day that he had not come over early to the Stebbins mansion, his freckled face full of pleasant anticipation of what they should do together, his willing hands ready to execute her orders. Lately, to be sure, Zabbie had been rather unreliable, had seemed at times even a little rebellious, but he had always come back. Now Polly scarcely saw him, except occasionally in the evening or on his half day off Saturday. Then his conscience seemed to trouble him for he appeared regularly to clean the shed for Polly, in his old faithful way, and to do any odd jobs that she had saved for him. One week when he could not come himself, he sent the Daggetts' niece, Ethel, in his place, because, as he told Polly afterwards on the telephone, he knew she was fond of kittens.

"Well, don't send her again, Zabbie, thanks just the same," Polly had retorted. "She let three kittens escape into the garden, and she burnt the fish to the bottom of the pan—and I had to take her home in Flossie because she was afraid she should meet the cows on the way." And after that Zab did not send anybody, although the occasions when he could not come himself grew more and more frequent.

The kittens, on the whole, brought Polly the most satisfaction during this tiresome and anxious summer. For, in spite of Zab's defection, the business flourished beyond all her expectations. It *was* far better not to depend on other people, Polly told herself with conviction. And yet she was not working altogether single-handed. Old Dr. Hill, whose eyes always twinkled when he looked at Polly, showed great interest in the enterprise whenever he came to see Aunt Retta and spread the news of Polly's cats even to the big hotels at Black Harbor and Rocky Point where he had several patients during the summer. There was hardly a day, indeed, when a car did not stop at the gate of the Stebbins mansion to enquire for the famous cats. Polly spent hours constructing little crates, and she did not dare to tell Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell how very far and wide she and Flossie scoured the country farms to keep up the supply of kittens.

But Polly liked to be busy and as she drove along the midsummer roads, fragrant with wild roses and

bayberry and little spruces in the sunshine, she found it easy to forget unpleasant things. Once, when the road led her past the field where she and Randall had chased the kittens, she forced herself to look at it coolly, with steady eyes and chin cocked high. There was nothing more to one field than another!

And so the weeks went on, and Polly rejoiced to see how her account in the Bellport Savings Bank was growing. By the last week in August there would be nearly, if not quite, a hundred dollars and then she would tell her secret, at least to the one who was most concerned. Georgie-Porgie really had kept it for her pretty well. Georgie-Porgie! He had not turned up again all summer after the night of the break. Well, he evidently *did* know what was good for him. Once, when life at the Stebbins mansion seemed more than usually without zest, Polly caught herself half wishing for a sight of her lively cousin. Then, remembering his idiotic note, she made a face at nothing in particular.

At last it was time to begin to look for an answer to her letter to Debby, and Polly walked out to the mail box twice a day with a beating heart. But the middle of August came and went and there was no letter. Perhaps Debby was so disgusted that she was not going to write at all, thought Polly, her usual good sense deserting her in her morbid anxiety. But the strange part of it was that after the first week in August nobody heard from Debby and genuine alarm

took possession of the Stebbins mansion. Aunt Retta's irritability increased as it always did when she was under mental stress, and Aunt Nell's face seemed to Polly even more white and transparent than it had been all through the difficult summer.

"She may have strained her wrist again, as she did last winter," suggested Aunt Nell.

"Then why doesn't Eric write?" demanded Aunt Retta. "He ought to know how anxious we are. I declare, men are all alike. They are never to be trusted in a family emergency." Miss Henrietta was indeed very much upset, for if she trusted any one, it was Debby's husband.

Then one morning in the last week of August Polly, who now again had begun to look eagerly for Henry Gill's old Ford, found another postal card from Randall in the box.

> DEAR POLLY, (it read)
>
> I'm leaving Chicago at last. Have had a bully time, and got filled to the brim for next year. Shall be back in Bellport the first of next week, to stay until college opens. And *am* I glad! What about you?
>
> Yours,
> R. G.

What did he mean—"what about you"? Did he after all, want *her* to be glad? "Yours, R. G."! Polly, coming back up the walk to the house, her eyes still on the card, smiled in spite of herself. Well,

she would be nice to him—if she had time! Though this next week was going to be awfuly busy! Then Polly, ever honest with herself, laughed aloud. Of course she should be glad to see him, why shouldn't she be? One always had jolly times with Randall. And she went into the house with such a rush that she almost upset Aunt Retta, who was coming through the drawing-room door.

"Wasn't there anything?" enquired Miss Henrietta sharply.

"Anything?" echoed Polly. "Oh—no." For the moment she had forgotten even Debby's letter.

"I wish you'd keep your wits about you, Polly," said Aunt Retta, turning abruptly back into the drawing-room. "Sometimes you act positively moon-struck."

And Polly, horrified, went on down the hall, and hastily dropped Randall's second card into the kitchen stove. But she had no need to look at it again for she knew every word of it by heart. When later in the day she found herself actually singing about the house, she was horrified again. What had come over her that she should feel so gay in the midst of this worry about Debby? Never had she seen her aunts so genuinely alarmed.

"Do you think that we ought to cable?" said Aunt Retta, pushing her plate away from her at luncheon.

"Perhaps we might wait a few days," said Aunt

Nell. "There have been delays before, you know."

"But never anything like this," said Aunt Retta positively, rising from the table, though she had eaten scarcely anything. "I shall not wait after Tuesday."

When, soon after luncheon, old Judge Parker came across the street, to invite the aunts to go for a drive, Polly drew a sigh of relief. Aunt Retta could never be persuaded to enter any car except the Judge's, but he had been for years in charge of the Stebbins affairs, and was trusted in all things. The drive would do them both good, thought Polly, closing the door of the car, after settling her aunts with cushions and rug in the back seat. And what fun it would be to have the house to herself. With a wave to the depárting car, she went quickly back up the walk. There were heaps of things that she wanted to do. Perhaps she might even slide down the banisters again, as she used to in the days when she and Debby first came to live at the Stebbins mansion. Debby! Surely they would hear in a day or two. Letters often went astray, and Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell were unduly alarmed. Polly ran up the stairs two steps at a time. What should she do first?

But she was not long to have the house to herself. For, coming down a half hour later—not, after all, on the banisters—she was startled to hear the sudden clang of the doorbell, echoing through the great house, as it only did when one was alone.

"Oh!" said Polly, in frank astonishment, as she opened the door, for there stood Miss Maria Pickett, fluttery and wind-blown as usual, her shabby black hat on one side, a large covered basket tied with a heavy cord, in her hand. Miss Pickett was not, so far as Polly knew, in the habit of calling at the Stebbins mansion although she had come once or twice to the kitchen door to see Jennie, who was some sort of distant relation.

"Won't you come in?" said Polly, recovering from her surprise, and opening the screen. "I am sorry that both my aunts have gone out."

"Yes," said Miss Pickett, stepping timidly into the hall, "I saw them driving by with Judge Parker. That's why I came. I want to see you. I've been planning to all summer."

More mystified than ever, Polly led the way into the drawing-room and pulled out a chair for Miss Pickett who sat stiffly down on the edge of it. She looked so little and shabby that Polly felt suddenly guilty to think that she had ever taken money for those ridiculous thunder storms, and was for once at a loss how to begin the conversation. But there was no need, for Miss Pickett, it seemed, had come not to be entertained but on a definite errand. As soon as she was seated with Polly on the opposite chair, she lifted her basket into her lap and began fumblingly, in her black cotton gloves, to untie the cord.

"I've brought you something, Polly," she said. "I

want you to have them for your business. I've been waiting until they were big enough. They're the handsomest ones that Six-Toes has ever had."

So saying, Miss Pickett removed the cover and held out the basket. In it were two of the silver-gray kittens, whose mother had taken the prize at the Portland Cat Show.

"Oh, Miss Pickett, how wonderful of you!" exclaimed Polly, lifting the charming gray bunches into her lap and burying her fingers deep in their fine silky ruffs. "They're darlings, and I do appreciate your bringing them—but, indeed I couldn't take them. There's no reason why you should give them to me, and you can always get a good price yourself, you know." As she spoke, Polly noticed, in the strong afternoon light from the windows, that Miss Pickett's well-brushed jacket and skirt were actually threadbare.

"Yes, you *must* take them, Polly," insisted Miss Pickett, leaning forward, her thin face pinched with earnestness, her fluttery voice more trembling than usual. "And there *is* a reason. I've always wanted to do something for the Stebbins, but there never seemed to be anything. And then when you told me about your cats the day of the storm, I knew I had something at last. You *must* take them. I feel I'm paying a little of the debt."

"The debt?" echoed Polly in astonishment.

"Yes," Miss Pickett hurried on, "your aunts, you

know—before my brother died and the mortgage was going to be foreclosed. They held part of it and they gave up going to California to help straighten it out. They saved the house for us. But Miss Henrietta wouldn't ever let me speak of it afterwards. 'Stebbinses don't want any thanks,' she said—I remember her words to this day—'If there's anything it is their duty to give up,' she said, 'they give it up, and that's the end of it.' She's a grand woman, Polly, and we're proud of the Stebbins name in Bellport, but you know how Miss Henrietta is—she sort of shuts you up."

"Yes," replied Polly vaguely, her eyes fastened on Miss Pickett's face, her hands stroking the kittens.

"Now don't say any more, child, they're for you," said Miss Pickett, rising with nervous haste from her chair, and placing the cover on her basket, as if she were afraid that Polly might try to put the kittens back into it. "And now I'll be going and I don't want any thanks either, only I wish Six-Toes had had twenty kittens!"

Polly, smiling faintly at this large responsibility for Six-Toes, followed her caller across the drawing-room into the hall, and opened the front door.

"But I do thank you, just the same, Miss Pickett," she said mechanically, as she closed the screen.

For many minutes she stood just inside, the kittens still in her arms, and watched the stooping figure with the basket, as it disappeared up the road,

but her mind was neither on cats nor on Miss Pickett. "If there is anything it is their duty to give up, they give it up, and that's the end of it!" Even Miss Pickett knew the tradition of the Stebbins, and took pride in it because it was the best in Bellport. Aunt Retta had given up *her* chance to go out into the world, without question, as a matter of course, just for poor forlorn little Miss Pickett. And now she, Polly—Polly turned abruptly from the screen. Why she had not even offered to drive her visitor home, and it was a hot and dusty walk along the Thomaston road in the sun. How long had she been standing at the screen door? Perhaps she could still overtake Miss Pickett. Quickly she ran back through the hall, to put the kittens in the shed and get the car.

But Miss Pickett was destined, after all, to walk home by herself, for a minute later, as Flossie came jouncing out of the driveway, it suddenly occurred to Polly that she had forgotten to lock the front door. Stopping the car, she looked back, just in time to be convinced that something or somebody was disappearing surreptitiously into the house through the screen.



Chapter Thirteen

OTHER CATS LET OUT OF BAGS

POLLY noiselessly opened the screen and stepped into the hall, then hastily put her hand over her mouth, to stifle the sound of surprise at what she saw through the drawing-room door. For on Aunt Retta's most elegant Chippendale chair reposed a large striped cotton bag which wiggled, and tiptoeing around the room, touching and peering at all the treasures that filled it, were Philip and Alexander Gage.

The twins, as a matter of fact, had long wanted to find out just what was behind that mysterious door, past which they had always been hurried on the rare occasions when Polly had brought them into

the house and they were now making the most of their opportunity. Their small square backs were turned toward Polly, and for several seconds they continued to rub their stubby fingers along the mahogany tables and the pewters and porcelains which covered them, quite unaware of the interested eyes at the door. Then Philip, looking up, suddenly saw a reflection in the glass of a picture and whirled around.

"Oh Polly," he cried, running eagerly across the room, Alexander at his heels, "we thought you'd gone out."

"The door was open, so we came in," said Alexander, evidently feeling that some explanation was due. "We've got something for you." And the twins looked over their shoulders at the cotton bag.

It was always well to take heed when Alexander spoke, but for a moment Polly just looked down at them, standing so joyfully before her, and smiled as she had not smiled for weeks. She would not have believed that she could be so glad to see those two lively rascals.

"We came back last night," said Philip, "and we came over as soon as we could."

"How did you get here by yourselves?" demanded Polly, suddenly sober again. "Does your grandmother know about it?"

"We came across the fields," said Philip, avoiding Polly's second question.

"We wanted to bring you a present," said Alexander.

"The bag was awfully heavy," said Philip.

"You can open it now if you want to," said Alexander.

The twins ran across the room, and stood expectantly one on each side of the cotton bag, looking up at Polly.

"You'll like them," added Alexander. "There were some more and a big one, but we only got these."

Polly, fumbling with the cord, as Miss Pickett had fumbled on that same chair not half an hour ago, thought that she had never heard Alexander make so many remarks.

The twins watched impatiently while Polly pulled open the top of the bag, and took one glance inside, but they were quite unprepared for what happened next. Jerking the drawing-strings, Polly snatched up the bag and, holding it at arm's length, went on flying feet across the drawing-room and hall and out the front door. For, sitting on Aunt Retta's most elegant Chippendale chair, had been two small striped wood-pussies!

So swiftly did Polly go that she was already half way across the lawn before the twins reached the steps.

"Don't you want any more kitties?" said Philip, in a disappointed voice, catching up with her at last.

"Aren't they nice enough?" said Alexander.

"No," said Polly, "they wouldn't sell well. Where did you find them?" She set the bag gingerly down on the grass by the edge of the driveway, and turned upon the twins, straight and square beside her. When Polly spoke in that tone, Philip and Alexander instinctively stood at attention.

"In the pasture on West Hill," replied Philip.

"Do you know just where?" continued Polly.

"Yes," said Philip, "by the big bushes."

"Come on, then," she said, marshalling them both ahead of her toward the car.

Polly backed Flossie to where the bag lay on the edge of the grass. She lifted it carefully into the back of the car, tossing her coat to safety in the front, where Philip and Alexander at once came to blows as to who should hold it.

"Be quiet, you two," said Polly, in a strange low voice, "or I'll put you both out."

Philip allowed Alexander to hold one sleeve of the coat, and they started off down Stebbins hill, with as little jouncing as possible.

"Where are we going?" said Philip.

"To take the kitties back to their mother," replied Polly, shortly.

The twins had wanted so much to be friends again after all these weeks, and now the very first thing Polly seemed seriously displeased with them.

"Uncle Ranny's maybe coming soon," ventured

Philip, in an effort to be agreeable, looking up at Polly.

"Sh-sh!" said Polly.

After that nobody said a word until they came to the pasture which ran up to the white cottage. There Polly drew Flossie to the side of the road and slipping out, took the bag from the back. Holding it again at arm's length, she walked up into the pasture. Philip and Alexander, their heads filling the car window, watched her set the bag cautiously on the ground by the bushes, and pull it open, so that the kitties could walk out. Then she came running back down the hill, looking so much like the old Polly that the twins scrambled out of the car to meet her.

"Pick my coat out of the dirt, rascals," she commanded, pointing to where they had dropped it in the road. She rumpled their hair in the old cheerful way, then boosted them up on the wall. "Sit there a minute," she said, standing before them, "while I tell you about skunks."

The twins, dangling their corduroy legs in front of Polly, were very still for about two minutes. Then Philip slid suddenly to the ground, his forehead puckered by a new and disturbing idea.

"Are you going to leave the bag up in the pasture?" he enquired.

"Yes," said Polly.

"But Granny won't like it," protested Philip earnestly, "and Aunt Emma won't either."

"It's new," explained Alexander, his forehead also puckered. "Aunt Emma just made it, and she sewed Granny's name on it in pink letters."

"Well, mind what I said, and don't go near it until to-morrow," admonished Polly, shaking her finger impressively. "Now, you two run up the hill as fast as you can to your Granny. I'll come over to-morrow, and perhaps we'll go for a ride."

"We want to go now," said Philip, in despair at losing Polly again, having just found her.

"No," said Polly firmly, walking around the car and getting quickly into it, "I must go home now. Which of you is smart enough to get up to the house first!"

"*I* am!" cried both the twins, and started off, running sturdily.

But they had no real interest in the race, and at the first bend in the road they stopped with one accord, and turned to look after Polly, who was already far down the road, chugging along in a cloud of dust.

"Don't let's go home yet," said Alexander, thinking of Granny and Aunt Emma and the new laundry bag.

"No," said Philip, with the same thought.

"Let's go down and sit on the wall, and try to get a ride with somebody," said Alexander.

"Yes," said Philip.

So they ran down the hill again, to the spot where

Polly had left them. But they did not get up on the wall.

"What's that in the dirt?" said Philip, pointing.

They both went out into the middle of the road, and Alexander picked up a small thin book. There were no pictures in it, only uninteresting writing and numbers.

"Maybe it's Polly's," said Philip.

"There's a name on the outside," said Alexander.

The twins put their heads together and studied the cover. They could read very little, but they knew their letters.

"It's not Polly's name," said Philip.

"Z-a-b-d-i-e-l E-a-t-o-n," spelled Alexander, and he tried sounding the words. "I know," he said, "it's that red-haired boy who lives next to Polly."

"Shall we take it to Polly?" suggested Philip, who was eager for an excuse to go back to the Stebbins mansion.

"No," decided Alexander, after a moment's consideration, "she wouldn't like it. Don't you remember she told us that day we took Uncle Ranny's note that the next time we found anything with a name on it, we must take it right back to the person?"

"If we take it back to Zab's house, perhaps we'll see Polly," said Philip, pleased at this prospect.

"Yes," said Alexander. "We'll sit on the wall, and perhaps we can get a ride back."

So Philip and Alexander climbed up on the stones,

and sat side by side, peering up the road. But the very first car that came along was going the other way and when the twins looked around to see what kind of a one it was, who should be sitting behind the wheel of the truck but Zabdiel Eaton himself!

"We found something of yours," shouted Philip, jumping down from the wall, and running to the edge of the road, followed by Alexander, waving the little book.

Zab put on his brakes and brought the truck to a stop.

"Hello," he said. "What's up?"

"It's got your name on it," said Philip, while Alexander held out the little book. "We found it in the road."

Zab reached down and took the book, looking at it with a puzzled expression. He opened it and read in it, turning the pages, then glanced back at the cover and read some more. The longer he read, the more puzzled he looked and he seemed to have forgotten the twins entirely. After a minute or two he put the little book in his pocket and started his engine.

"Won't you even give us a ride?" said Philip, while both the twins looked up in despair. The ambition of their lives was some day to ride behind the wheel of a real truck.

"Nope," said Zab shortly, "not today." And he rumbled off up the road, leaving Philip and Alexander

looking solemnly after the truck. Their afternoon had been a complete failure.

Polly, meanwhile, rattled along toward home at Flossie's topmost speed. Her one object was to get back to the Stebbins mansion before the aunts, for she remembered that this time she really *had* left the door unlocked. And all the way home, in the rattle of the engine, she could seem to hear the words which Miss Pickett had spoken, repeating themselves over and over, in a sort of sing-song and pushing even the thought of the amusing adventure with the twins into the background, "If there is anything to give up, they *give* it up, and that's the end of it." The Stebbins way! Well, if she did not hear from Debby tomorrow, she would go to Aunt Retta and make an end of it somehow. "If there is anything to give up, they *give* it up, and that's the end of it." What a summer it had been, and what a day! But although Polly did not know it, this amazing afternoon had only begun.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Polly aloud, as she came in sight of the Stebbins mansion. For Judge Parker's car was just backing out of the driveway, and Aunt Retta's crutches were at that very moment disappearing through the unlocked front door.

Polly might, of course, have gone in through the shed door and given perhaps the appearance of having been all the time at home. But that, she thought a little grimly, was not the Stebbins way, so she walked

around to the front door and followed her aunts into the house. They were standing in the hall, Aunt Nell helping her sister to remove her wraps. At the sound of the opening screen, Miss Henrietta turned on her crutches.

"Well, Polly," she said sternly, "what have you to say for yourself? Do you realize that anybody—anybody at all—might have stepped in here from the street, and helped themselves to hundreds of dollars worth of valuables?"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Retta," said Polly, "but I went out in a hurry."

"I am sure I cannot think of any hurry," said Miss Henrietta, "that would excuse such an oversight."

"No," said Polly, and grinned in spite of herself. Aunt Retta was indeed unlikely to think of wood-pussies reposing on her most elegant Chippendale chair.

"I suppose your mind was on cats, as usual," continued Aunt Retta, then, looking with still greater severity at her niece, "and I want you to understand, Polly, once and for all, that I will *not* have you laughing at me when I am speaking of serious matters. If I ever find the door unlocked again I shall take drastic measures, and if you are a Stebbins at all, you will not have to be spoken to again."

"I don't believe I am," said Polly, in a low voice, walking past her aunts down the hall, her face quite sober again.

How could one even try to be a Stebbins in this house, and did Aunt Retta ever stop to consider that being one might include also being a little just and forbearing! Would one *ever* be able to resolve to speak to Aunt Retta about anything without finding her at once utterly intolerable? Polly stood still in the middle of the kitchen and looked at the tea-kettle. A tea-kettle is a soothing thing and after a minute or two Polly began to feel better. Of course she *had* been careless about the door, though who would run off in twenty minutes with a lot of old tables and bric-a-brac. What was the use of letting Aunt Retta get on one's nerves? She was tired with her ride and all, poor old dear, and needed her tea. Perhaps after she had had it, she could even be regaled with the wood-pussies and the Chippendale chair. Polly chuckled in anticipation of Aunt Retta's expression. She walked across the kitchen to the tea-kettle, filled it and put it on the stove. Perhaps, though, Aunt Retta would not get the full flavor of the adventure. "A grand woman," said Miss Pickett, "but she sort of—shuts you up." And the twins might be banished from the Stebbins mansion forever.

Having set out the cups and the cream, Polly remembered that she had not looked at the silver-gray kittens since she had thrust them hastily into the shed an hour ago.

Going on to the back hall, Polly carefully opened the shed door and slipped through. A swift glance

assured her that all was well with her new treasures, who were curled up together, away from the other kittens, on the table by the window. Polly walked across the shed, and put her cheek down on the soft bunch of fur, which immediately began to purr.

It was just then that she smelled a cigarette. Had Zab been over? Zabbie did not often smoke, only when he wanted to make the other boys think that he was a regular fellow. Then, all at once, she noticed that the smell was coming in through the window. Quickly opening the door beside her, Polly looked out.

"Well, for heaven's sake!" she said. "Where did *you* come from?"

For stretched out on the settee beneath the window, his hands behind his head, was George.



Chapter Fourteen

POLLY HEARS AN EXPLANATION

"WHY on earth didn't you come in at the front door, like a civilized man?" said Polly, surveying George critically, as he stood straight and handsome in his usual faultless yachting clothes, in the middle of the shed. She was trying her best to appear stern and indifferent but it was many weeks since the night of the break and George had never looked so jolly. In spite of all she could do, there was the shadow of her alluring smile about the corners of her mouth.

"Well, there didn't seem to be anybody around," said George, with a grin, "and considering last time, I thought I wouldn't try another entrance without

an escort. Is Aunt Retta O.K.?" he added, as an afterthought.

"I should say it was about time you showed a little concern," said Polly.

"I'm almost sure I called up the next day from Rockland," protested George. "Didn't Jennie give you the message?"

"No," said Polly, "she didn't and don't prevaricate. As it happens, Aunt Retta wasn't much hurt. Where, by the way, have you been all this time?"

"Clear to Eastport," said George, his face lighting up. "I met some fellows I know, with some other people on a big yacht, and we had a dandy cruise."

"Oh," said Polly, contemplating George for a moment with a meditative eye. "Was she pretty?"

"Who? The yacht?" said George, looking at Polly in astonishment.

"No, stupid," said Polly, "the girl." And she laughed outright. "Don't tell me you bought all those elegant new clothes you've got on for the benefit of the fellows on the big yacht!"

"You sure beat the Dutch, Polly," said George, his bronzed cheeks a trifle redder than before.

"What's her name, Georgie-Porgie?" demanded Polly gaily. "Out with it!"

"Mabel," said George, fairly cornered. "And I say, Polly, she's sure a peach. You'll like her."

"Perhaps," said Polly, raising her eyebrows. "But, come on. I've got the water on for tea. You'd better

drink a cup and make your peace with Aunt Retta. You never said goodbye to her last time, you know." And Polly started toward the kitchen.

George, however, strode ahead of her, and blocked the way to the door.

"See here, Polly," he said, "I want to talk to you first. I'm in a jam."

"As usual," said Polly. "What now?"

"Well, I've had some extra expenses ("White flannels!" murmured Polly) and Mother says I've had my last check till I get home, and the fact is, I've not enough to take the boat to Portland and put her up for the winter. I don't dare make the trip without some gas."

"What do you want *me* to do, spendthrift?" enquired Polly.

"Well, I thought perhaps you could suggest to Aunt Retta—" began George.

"No," said Polly, shortly, "nothing in it. You can do your own suggesting, only you'd better wait until she's had her tea."

"Oh, come on, Polly, be a good pal," begged George.

Polly shook her head.

"You may not know it," she replied, "but it is weeks since I have had the slightest use for you."

"What in time's the matter?" said George, staring at his cocky young cousin in genuine astonishment. "You're not still mad about that silly break, are you, now that Aunt Retta is O.K.?"

"No," said Polly, looking him straight in the eye, "but you can just apologize here and now for that idiotic note."

"What note?" said George, clearly bewildered.

"You know very well what note," retorted Polly, her eyes blacker and brighter than George had ever seen them.

"No, I don't," he said, but it seemed to Polly that his voice faltered.

"What about that *stuff* that you left in the mail-box?" she said, raising her eyebrows.

"I didn't leave anything in the mail-box," said George—and now she was sure that his eyes wavered.

"No Stebbins," said Polly, in accents ridiculously like Aunt Retta's, "would stoop to such a transparent fib! Come with me, Perfidious Jones." And, pushing George ahead of her, Polly made her way among the kittens and out the door, closing it carefully.

"Where is Aunt Retta?" enquired George, following Polly reluctantly into the kitchen.

"Having her tea in the drawing-room with Aunt Nell, I suppose," said Polly, with a glance at the stove and the table, from which the preparations for tea had vanished. "Where you also will be presently, when I am through with you," she added, with a mischievous glance over her shoulder.

Then she led the way through the back hall and into Debby's little studio, walking directly across to the table by the window, the drawer of which she

had long used for important memorabilia. She opened it and fumbled around, turning over a few things that made her frown, and one that made her smile. Gee-whiz, thought George, watching her from the middle of the room, Polly was getting more irresistible every day, why she was actually stunning in that red blouse, and he had forgotten that smile during the voyage to Eastport. But what the deuce did she think she had on him now?

"Here it is," said Polly at last, uncovering an envelope at the bottom of the drawer, and holding it out triumphantly to her cousin. "What do you suppose Mabel would think of *this?*"

George took the envelope, which had his own name on it, and read the note which it contained with apparent stupefaction. He read it twice, then stared at the envelope, as if he could not believe his eyes.

"But—but I destroyed that!" he stammered. "I tore it to bits. Wh—where did *you* get it?"

He looked so baffled and helpless, standing there in the middle of the room, that Polly laughed in her old merry way.

"You must be confusing it with a missive to Mabel," she said, her eyes twinkling. "I found it, as I said, reposing in our mail-box the morning after you vanished. It's a good thing you didn't come back when I first got it but I believe I'll forgive you now, Georgy-Porgy, if you'll start in to tell the truth, only don't get down on your knees on this dusty floor. Keep

your new flannels for the deck of the yacht and Mabel!"

But George was for once quite impervious to Polly's banter. He was still staring at the note, and fingering it, as if he doubted its reality.

"I *am* telling the truth," he said. "I admit I *did* put it in the mail-box the night I skipped, but when I got down to the foot of the hill I rather wished I hadn't—thought it might sound like a bit of rot. ("It did!" murmured Polly.) So I came back and took it out, and when I got down to that sewer hole by the library, I tore it up and dropped it through the grating."

Polly looked sharply at George, for he really did act as if he were telling the truth.

"Did you look at it again before you tore it?" she said slowly, her brows contracted, as they always were when she was thinking out something puzzling.

"No," said George. "It was dark all the way down the hill, and the light in front of the library was on the blink. What's the matter?" For Polly's face was suddenly all alight.

"Then how could you be sure it was your own note that you destroyed?" she demanded, clasping her hands tightly together in front of her.

"Why—there wasn't anything else in the mail-box at that time of night, was there?" said George.

"Yes, there was!" cried Polly. "I put a letter in before I went to bed. The envelope was just this

shape. When you reached in you must have taken that by mistake!"

"But this one has a loose flap," said George, still staring at it. "It was an old one I happened to have in my pocket."

"I may have forgotten to seal mine," said Polly quickly, "so that they would feel just alike. That's exactly what happened!"

"Then—then, you mean you think I tore up your letter," faltered George doubtfully. His reactions were always slower than Polly's.

"Yes," she cried. And to George's utter astonishment, she seized him by both arms and began to waltz him around the room, whistling the gayest of tunes.

She pushed him finally up against the table, on the edge of which he sat for a moment to catch his breath.

"What's the matter with you anyway, Polly?" he said, still puzzled. "Say, I *am* sorry about that letter."

"You needn't be," said Polly, standing exuberantly before him. "Isn't there something called a 'deus ex machina'—well, you're *it!*" And she beamed at her cousin for a moment with the most radiant smile that the nonplussed George had ever seen.

That letter to Debby had never gone at all! Everything was just as it had been in July! She could begin all over again! With a gesture of happy abandon, Polly swung around toward the door.

"Come on, Georgy-Porgy," she said. "You'll have to do your own begging but I'll go in with you and

have some tea. You're not such a bad pal after all."

George slipped reluctantly off the edge of the table, but as he hesitated there was a peremptory voice from the drawing-room.

"Polly," called Aunt Retta, "with whom are you talking out there? It sounds just like George."

"Come on," laughed Polly. "There's no getting out of it now! I'll back you up, Georgy-Porgy."

But this time Polly was not as good as her word. For as they went through the back hall the telephone bell rang, and George had to go on alone, while Polly stopped to answer it.

"Oh, hello Neddie," she said. "Yes, I remember about tomorrow— Oh, it's all off?—You've what?—Found you promised somebody else?—Oh, Alice!—Of course, it's all right. I'm not sure that I could go anyway— Oh, for goodness sakes, don't *explain*, Neddie! What do I care— Why, *of course* I don't mind. Why should I? I think it's awfully nice of you to take Allie. She sits around with her grandfather so much she's going into a dry rot— No, I didn't *say* that— Alice is all right, only— Oh, Neddie, you make me tired." And Polly hung up the receiver with a click. As she did so, the back door bell rang.

It proved to be Jennie, come, as usual, to prepare the supper. She and Polly had long been the best of friends and Polly lingered a few minutes in the

kitchen to hear about Jennie's latest difficulties with her young man.

"Why do you bother with him, Jen?" said Polly. "He's a nuisance."

"Yes," admitted Jennie, "I know you can't count on any of 'em, but they're that wheedlin'."

"Well, don't *let* him wheedle," said Polly.

"I'm not the manager you are, Polly," replied Jennie, shaking her head.

"I don't know about that," remarked Polly over her shoulder, as, remembering George, she went through the kitchen door.

George and Mabel! Neddie and Alice! Well, it was all a good joke. Since George's explanation about the letter, the world seemed suddenly a jolly place again.

At the drawing-room door Polly paused, arrested by what she saw. For George was sitting cosily on the little sofa between Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell, his ruddy youth making them look older and frailer than ever, and Aunt Retta was handing him a ten-dollar bill, which she had evidently just taken from her bag. How on earth had Georgy-Porgy managed that in ten minutes! "You can't count on 'em," were the words that flashed through Polly's mind, "but they're that wheedlin'." Well, it was true that, next to herself, nobody knew how to wheedle Aunt Retta like George.

"Go down to your boat now, George," Aunt Retta was saying in her firm, managing voice, "and get your things. Polly will make up the guest-room bed, and you can have a good night's sleep and get an early start in the morning."

Polly looked on in high amusement while George cheerfully kissed both his aunts and jumped up from the sofa.

"You've been swell, Aunt Retta," he said enthusiastically. "I won't forget it. And I'll see that you have the money back."

Polly preceded George to the front door and opened it for him.

"Don't let that ten dollars go to your head, now," she admonished.

"You'd better not bother to make up the bed," said George in a low voice. "It's early yet, and I might go on to Boothbay."

"You mean you're not coming back, rascal, after all this frenzied finance?" said Polly, searching him with her black eyes. "What's at Boothbay? Mabel?"

"The big yacht's there," admitted George, "and they might run me through to Portland. I could send for the boat later, you know."

"Well of all the unregenerate scamps!" said Polly, following him out under the portico. "I have a notion to take poor Aunt Retta's ten dollars away from you this minute."

"Oh, I need that," said George, clamping his hands

over his pockets, and running down the front steps. "S'long, Polly. I'll be seeing you."

"Give my love to Mabel!" called Polly, as George leaped over the gate, in his hurry to get away.

Then she walked slowly into the house. But it was not her harum-scarum cousin who was uppermost in her thoughts. She was thinking that she would go straight to Aunt Retta, and say at last what she had been trying to say ever since the beginning of the summer. She was turning over in her mind just how she should begin when, as usual, Miss Henrietta took charge of the situation.

"I am going upstairs to lie down, Polly," said Aunt Retta, as her niece came into the hall, "but I wish that you would see that there is fresh water in those bowls of marigolds. There is a slight peculiar something here in the drawing-room that neither Aunt Nell nor I can make out but that is very unpleasant."

Polly looked in at the door, then hastily turned her face away and walked into the south parlor on the other side of the hall. For Aunt Retta, her aristocratic Stebbins nose sniffing delicately, was bending over on her crutches in front of her most elegant Chippendale chair!



Chapter Fifteen

A REFUSAL

When Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell had gone upstairs to take their afternoon naps, Polly moved restlessly about from one room to the other, unable to settle herself at anything. It would be an hour before she could have her interview with Aunt Retta, and for Polly, when she had definitely made up her mind, waiting was always intolerable.

She straightened out the music on the piano in the south parlor, and picked up Aunt Nell's sewing-silk, which Isaak Walton had playfully unraveled under the table. Then she changed the water in the

bowls of marigolds on the drawing-room mantel, as Aunt Retta had directed. When she put them back, she lingered for a few moments, studying the miniature of little Eleanor which stood on the mantel below Great-grandmother's portrait. In spite of the thick fair hair, which was Eric's, little Eleanor *did* suggest Debby. "A real Stebbins face, like Great-grandmother's," Aunt Retta had declared at once with satisfaction. Polly looked up at the dark loveliness of the countenance in the frame above, then back at the fair child of the miniature. What *was* the Stebbins face? Aunt Nelly had said once that beauty came from living with fine thoughts. Was that what made Great-grandmother and little Eleanor alike, just generations of fine thoughts?

Polly turned from the mantel and looked around at the beautiful old room, filled with things used and cherished by so many Stebbins, and haunted now by the delicate, sharp scent of the marigolds. All at once she remembered how Debby had stood there, in front of Great-grandmother's portrait, on the morning of her wedding day and looked with a strange intentness at it all. Polly, not yet thirteen, had thought only that Debby, standing there, was the most beautiful person in the world, but now her sister's words came back to her: "Oh Pollykins," Debby had said impulsively, catching sight of her little sister in the doorway, "I don't want to forget a bit of it. Something *lives* in this room—something fine—and we mustn't lose it—

ever!" Now Polly knew it too. It would hurt, of course, to give up college, but this was home, this quiet room, haunted by something pungent, like the marigolds. She belonged here—surely it would not be so hard to stay with it all for another year, that is, if one were true to the fine intangible thing—the Stebbins thing that lived in this old room.

Polly, not often given to meditation, was brought back to the realities of the moment by the sound of a car coming to a stop with creaking brakes. Walking over to the window that looked toward Zab's, she saw the Daggett truck standing in front of the Eatons', and Zab himself just getting out of it. Herman Daggett was at the wheel, and as soon as Zab had alighted, the truck rumbled away again. What was Zabbie at home so early for? Polly saw him hesitate in front of the house and take a few steps toward the Stebbins mansion. Oh dear, was he coming over? Somehow, she did not feel like Zabbie just now. All that she wanted was to go to Aunt Retta at the first possible moment.

Polly stepped back from the window, so that Zab should not see that she was there but he had already turned to go into his own house, thank goodness. She walked back across the hall to the south parlor, and picking up a book, sat down in a chair by the window. She must stay where she could hear the very first sound of Aunt Retta's crutches on the floor above. But she found that she could not read. Her mind

seemed as restless as her body, full of odd thoughts, and a half-regretful eagerness for what she had to do. Besides, it was altogether contrary to Polly's usual active habits, to be sitting quietly indoors, reading a book, on a pleasant afternoon, and her eyes were upon the window rather than upon her page.

That was why she saw her next caller at the very moment that his foot touched the gravel of the walk, Zabbie, alas, coming after all, and to the front door! This almost never happened, for Zab was still ridiculously in awe of the Stebbins mansion. Polly remembered just how scared he had looked that day, long ago, when he had rung the front door-bell with a basket of quinces from his mother for Aunt Nell, and that other awful occasion when he had had to stand under the portico, and apologize to Aunt Retta for having broken one of the drawing-room windows. What solemn business was sending Zabbie up the front walk now?

"Hello," said Polly, opening the screen door. "What's up? And how do you happen to be home at this time of day, by the way? Haven't been fired, have you?"

"No," said Zab, wiping his feet carefully, for he was still in his working clothes, "I got through a little early, so Herman ran me home on his way to Rockland. I've got something for you, Polly."

This was so exactly what the twins had said when they had brought the wood-pussies earlier in the

afternoon that Polly grinned reminiscently. But Zab was very sober. He stood, ill-at-ease in the middle of the hall, evidently not knowing just how to go on.

"Well?" said Polly. "What is it? Shall we go on into the shed?"

"No," said Zab, "let's come in here." And to Polly's astonishment, he led the way into the south parlor.

"A formal call, Zabbie?" smiled Polly. "Pray be seated." And she herself sat down in the wing chair.

But Zab continued to stand, hesitating and uncomfortable, his freckled face looking redder than ever above his blue shirt. Suddenly she saw that he was handing her a small note-book, which he had taken from his pocket.

"I don't know what this is, Polly," he said awkwardly. "It has my name on it, but I never saw it before. It seems to have your writing inside."

Polly, jumping up from the wing chair, took the little book quickly from Zab's hand, and looked at it with a startled face.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded sharply.

"From those Gage kids," replied Zab.

"The twins?" said Polly, in an incredulous voice. "Where?"

"They stopped me on the road, when I was going back with the truck," explained Zab.

"Oh," said Polly, considering, her brows drawn together. "Over at the foot of West Hill?"

"Yes," said Zab. "They wanted a ride."

"But this was in my pocket," continued Polly, staring, still mystified, at the little book. Suddenly her face cleared, "Oh yes," she said, half to herself, "I remember now. My coat dropped into the road when the twins scrambled down from the car. It must have come out then, and they found it, the rascals."

There was a moment of silence, while Polly and Zab stood looking at each other.

"But how did my name get on it?" said Zab.

It was now Polly's turn to look ill-at-ease and so strange was the effect that Zab was quite aghast.

"*I* put your name on it," said Polly slowly. "I meant to tell you about it—only not quite yet. It's yours." And she held out the book to him.

Zab took it mechanically and opened it, reading again, with almost unseeing eyes, what he had already read more than once. The little book contained a careful column of figures, showing profits in the kitten business, all entered in Polly's clear, bold handwriting, and the total, as Zab plainly saw, was almost $75.00.

"I don't know what you mean, Polly," he said in a low voice, fingering the book, and avoiding her eyes.

"I mean just what I say, Zabbie," said Polly, looking directly at him, her momentary confusion gone. "It's for you. I've kept out some for myself, it's in

another book. I meant from the start that you should be a sort of partner, only I wanted it for a surprise at the end of the summer."

"You mean, you want me to take the money you've saved?" said Zab, frowning in his effort fully to take in this revelation.

"Of course," said Polly, a bit impatiently. "That's the reason I began the cat business in the first place, so that there would be money to help you to go to Agricultural School. I know it's not a lot, but it's something. I suppose I should have told you before," she added, seeing the uncomprehending look on Zab's face, "but I wanted to be sure I could make a go it it."

Suddenly Zab raised his head.

"Say, Polly," he said, smiling at her—and it was as if for the first time she noticed how friendly a smile it was—"that was sure swell of you! I can't tell how it makes me feel—your thinking of me that way. I always have wanted to be partners with you, Polly, but sometimes it seemed as if you thought I was not smart enough. I liked helping with the kittens, and I didn't want any pay. Polly, I do think you're great, and—" His voice wavered and he stopped.

"Never mind about all that, Zabbie," said Polly hurriedly, cutting him short. "We're good pals, and I know you'd do as much for me. I don't want any thanks, just take it."

"But I can't take it, Polly," said Zab, recovering

himself, and now he looked at her with eyes that were very steady.

"Whatever do you mean, Zabbie?" she said. "Of course you'll take it."

"No," said Zab, squaring his shoulders and seeming all at once quite different from the awkward boy who had long been her faithful retainer, "I *can't*. Thanks just the same, Polly. It's awfully good of you, but—well, men don't take money from girls." And as he spoke he quietly dropped the little book into the seat of the wing chair.

"How absurd!" said Polly, staring at him in astonishment. "What difference can that make between you and me? Besides, you've earned it."

"No, I haven't," said Zab. "I've been over at the Daggetts' for weeks, and you've gone it alone. I think you've done a bully job too, Polly."

"But you helped when you could," she urged, ignoring the compliment, and determined to fight her cause to the last ditch. "I couldn't have got along without all the crates you made, and those two long trips to Camden and Belfast."

"That wasn't anything. It was fun working together the way we always have." And as he spoke Zab looked at her with eyes full of friendly goodwill.

"You're a trump," said Polly heartily, for, strangely enough, there had been nothing the least sentimental

in either Zab's voice or look. "But indeed, indeed you *must* take it, Zabbie," she added in despair, "or I shall feel that the summer has been a complete failure. Whatever shall I do with the money?"

"You can always put it in the savings bank," he said thriftily. "You'll be glad some time that you have it."

"For my old age?" suggested Polly, the wicked suspicion of a twinkle in the corners of her eyes, although her face was quite sober. Had Zabbie forgotten entirely the day when he had protested so ardently that she would not need to save for the future because they would be married and he should be taking care of her? She hoped to goodness he *had* forgotten—and yet!

"You're not mad about it, are you?" said Zab, who had missed the twinkle and saw before him only an unnaturally grave Polly. "We're going on being friends just the same, aren't we? You've always been one of my best friends, and always will be. You know that, don't you, Polly?"

"Yes, of course," said Polly, a little wearily, and laughed. "You'll let me give you a cat, any way, won't you, Zabbie, as a pledge of friendship?" Then with a gesture of defeat she picked up the account book from the wing chair, and thrust it into a table drawer, out of sight. "Have you decided about Agricultural School, Zabbie?" she enquired, as if closing the drawer upon their disagreement.

"I don't think I'll go," he said slowly, "not this year. You see, Mr. Daggett is almost sure he can keep me on for the winter at half pay. The work's awfully jolly and I'm learning a lot and I can save ever so much for next year. Truly, I don't mind a bit not going this fall."

"Oh, don't you?" said Polly, feeling very flat.

It was all curiously stiff, as if they were strangers meeting for the first time. Now Zab glanced at the clock on the mantel.

"Well, I'll be getting along," he said, taking a step or two toward the door. But he turned again, "You've been a downright brick, Polly," he said holding out his hand. "I shan't ever forget." Then he strode quickly out of the room and was gone.

For a minute after the screen door had snapped behind Zab Polly stood very still. Was it a ridiculous dream that a moment before she had been stiffly shaking hands with Zabbie—*Zabbie*—in the middle of the south parlor! Never in her life had she felt so baffled, even a little stunned. Was it really *Zab* who had been standing there before her, telling her that he could not accept her money and her help—Zab, who for so many years had been her willing subject, taking from her hand whatever she chose to give. His amazing words still echoed through her mind, "Thank you just the same, Polly. It's awfully good of you but men don't take money from girls." His voice had trembled a little, to be sure, but there

had been a note of finality in it that Polly had recognized at once.

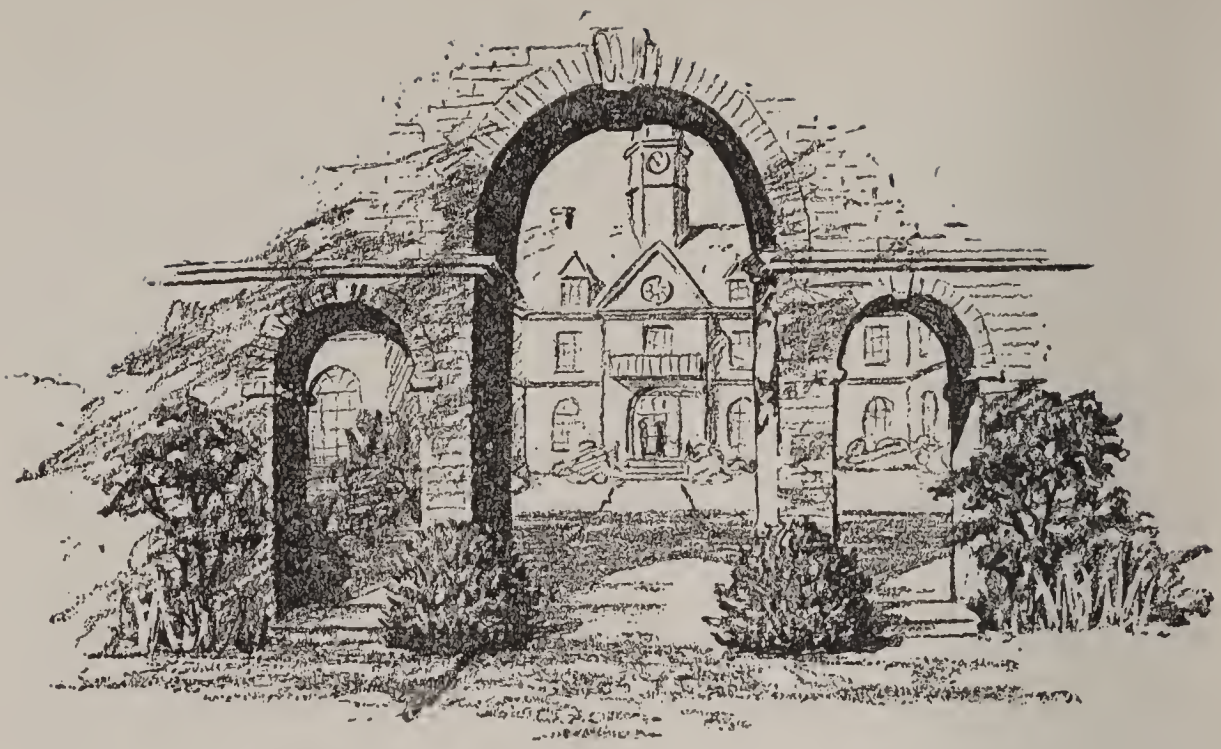
Even more amazing than his words, however, had been Zab himself. What he had said had not sounded funny in the least, as Polly somehow felt that it should have. Zab really *had* looked like a man for the first time, his slouching shoulders squared with a sort of dignity, his large awkward hands clasped quietly behind him. For a moment he had seemed fully as old as she, perhaps even a little older, with a touch of that mastery that every Stebbins admired in a man. It had made Polly feel strangely speechless and it astonished her now to recall how little she had been able to say before he had turned on his heel and was gone. But what had he been in such a hurry about in the end, thought Polly, as if he were actually eager to get away from her? What on earth could he be going to do so late in the afternoon?

With a sudden impulse, Polly walked over to the window and looked out at the road. There was Zab's red head and blue shirt bobbing along on the other side of the hedge, but he was going down the hill toward the village, instead of back toward his own house. Moreover, he was walking as fast as he could without actually running. Polly watched with interest. Once, halfway down the hill, Zab glanced swiftly over his shoulder. Polly was not sure whether or not he saw her at the window, for she stepped quickly back, but it seemed to her that for a minute he walked

with a less eager haste. Then, just as he came to the foot of the hill, a most surprising thing happened.

Suddenly, from the old weather-beaten summer-house at the edge of the Stebbins place, appeared the figure of a girl in a bright red dress, who went swiftly toward Zab. It was Ethel Daggett! Polly, frozen at the window, saw them meet, saw Zab, who must suppose himself hidden by the intervening bushes, put his hands on Ethel's shoulders and look down into her face, saw them going off, hand in hand, toward the field, the world and Polly apparently well forgotten.

So *that* was it, said Polly to herself. *That* was why Zab was so reconciled to putting off the Agricultural School and working at the dairy farm for a year! *That* was where he had been so many times when she had wanted him. Fascinated and a little dazed, she watched the two figures, so utterly absorbed in each other, walking over the distant meadow. How exactly like Ethel Daggett to come to a trysting-place in a bright red dress! Suddenly the whole familiar landscape began to look a little queer to Polly, for there in the middle of it was *her* Zabbie, going away like that, after all these years, with somebody else. Polly caught her breath, with an odd pang, for somehow she knew that the old Zabbie that she had always known and managed would never come back.



Chapter Sixteen

POLLY MEASURES UP

VERY sober, Polly stood there for many minutes, staring out of the window. Did one always have this queer lonesome feeling when things came to an end? Suddenly Polly shook her head and laughed aloud. She must take care, or she would soon be sentimental herself. That is what they were, men, just a lot of sentimental geese—Zab and Neddie and George. George! Why she had forgotten *that* interview since her scene with Zab. But now thoughts of the other events of this extraordinary afternoon came rushing back. Her slate was clean—the letter to Debby had never gone at all! And surely Aunt Retta

must be up from her nap by this time. With a renewed sense of being set free, Polly turned from the window and walked quickly across the room. Not another moment should be lost!

As she came into the hall she could hear the familiar sound of crutches overhead. Two steps at a time, Polly ran up the stairs and along the hall to Aunt Retta's door, an odd elation in her heart. She rapped quickly and at the sound of Miss Henrietta's voice, turned the knob and went in.

Aunt Retta, in her black afternoon dress, her white hair freshly arranged on her handsome head, was standing on one crutch by the four-poster, bending slightly forward, as she poked about under the valance with the other. In the easy chair by the window lay a bit of knitting, a strand of the wool running across the floor and under the bed. Aunt Retta looked up as Polly entered.

"That ball is bewitched," she said, poking vainly. "It acts like a live thing."

Polly walked at once over to the bed, and lifting the valance, quickly retrieved the wool. But Aunt Retta continued to poke.

"There's something else under there," she announced, "Every time I touch it it bounces away. If I didn't know that I was on my last one, I should say that it was another ball."

Polly got down on her hands and knees and looked. Then, making herself as flat as possible, she reached

under the bed. When she stood up she held in her arms a small black and white kitten, very ruffled and frightened.

"How many more times, Polly," said Aunt Retta, "shall I have to tell you that I will *not* have those cats in the house? This is the second time in a week that I have found one of them under my bed, and I simply *cannot* have it happen again."

"I'm sorry," said Polly cheerfully, determined that nothing, this time, should thwart her purpose with Aunt Retta. "I do my best, but they all seem to have such an amazing affection for you, you know!" And Polly smiled her most irresistible smile at Aunt Retta.

But Miss Henrietta was not to be beguiled.

"I have been wanting for some time to talk to you about those cats, Polly," she continued, the little hard line around her mouth, that was always there when she was annoyed.

Polly, still standing by the bed, with the frightened kitten snuggling against her neck, felt that she had, after all, chosen a most inauspicious moment for her interview. Perhaps Aunt Retta was having more trouble than usual with her hip. A twinge, as of pain, flickered indeed for a moment across the stern face, as Miss Henrietta turned back toward her chair, the ball of wool in her hands. Polly quickly pulled the chair nearer, and took the crutches, helping her aunt to sit down. When Miss Henrietta was settled with her knitting, she looked up, and Polly felt, with

a sudden pang, that she had never seen Aunt Retta quite so white and drawn. She seemed smaller than usual too, in the depths of the big chair, surrounded by the massive furniture of the high old room, and with the strong late afternoon sunlight streaming in through the long windows. More than ever Polly wished for Debby. But when Aunt Retta spoke, it was with her usual spirit.

"I feel that this cat business has gone about far enough, Polly," she said with decision. "You have never been able to keep them confined to the shed. Only Monday one of them got into the clam chowder on the kitchen table. And besides, I have never liked, as you know, having the Stebbins door-bell rung by every Tom, Dick and Harry who happens to want a chance to look inside a Stebbins door."

"Izaak Walton helped with the chowder," said Polly quickly, rubbing her cheek against the kitten. "And Tom, Dick and Harry, have never seen anything more exalted than the inside of a Stebbins shed."

"Your tongue is still a little too ready, Polly," said Miss Henrietta, her brows very level.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Retta," said Polly again, biting her lip. How utterly impossible it was ever to get started with Aunt Retta.

There was a moment of tense silence. Then the door opened, and Miss Eleanor came in. It seemed to Polly that she too looked unusually white and

frail, standing in her gray muslin dress in the bright light of the room. Oh, how had she ever considered leaving them alone, these two, in this great house?

"Are you ready to go downstairs, sister?" said Aunt Nell quietly, looking in faint surprise from Aunt Retta to Polly.

"No," said Miss Henrietta, but her voice was already less determined. It was odd, thought Polly, how Aunt Nelly always managed to calm troubled waters, by just coming serenely into a room. "Sit down a minute, Eleanor," continued Aunt Retta, "I have just been telling Polly that I am sick and tired of having our home turned into a cattery, with the hoi polloi going in and out of our doors. The Stebbins mansion has never been used to that sort of thing."

"Polly has built up a nice little business," said Aunt Nell, smiling across the room at her niece. It flashed over Aunt Nell that she had never seen Polly look quite so mature before—yes, even a little pretty, with the deep color in her cheeks, and the angles of her slim, alert figure softened, as she drooped, for once a little wearily, against the high post of the bed. Perhaps, thought Aunt Nell, Polly would yet be a handsome woman.

"Well, be that as it may," said Aunt Retta decidedly, "I can see no reason for going on with it any longer. In three weeks Polly will be ready to start for college, and she might as well begin now to put

her affairs in order. I am sure *I* am not going to be left with a shed full of cats."

There was silence for a moment. Through the long window across the room Polly could see the fields that rolled away to the little house, now gleaming white in the sunset, to which Randall would soon be coming back. And far away, beyond that little house and the woods and hills was college where she and Randall were to have worked this winter—together. Until this moment she had never fully realized what it would mean to give up Sanbornville.

"I am not going to college," said Polly suddenly, taking the kitten from her face, and looking directly at Aunt Retta.

"What!" exclaimed Miss Henrietta, dropping her knitting into her lap.

"I have decided," continued Polly steadily, "that if you and Aunt Nell do not mind, I will put off going until next year."

"Why on earth should you do that?" said Aunt Retta, looking at Polly in astonishment. "You are all ready, and everything is arranged. I don't like changes at the last moment."

"The money is in the bank, you know, Polly," said Aunt Nell, her gentle face full of perplexity. "You are not thinking of that, are you?"

"No," said Polly, "but—but I think I should like to take some extra courses at the Academy first—in science."

"It's that young Gage fellow who has put these ideas into your head," said Aunt Retta. "When a plan has been definitely made, I don't care to have outsiders interfering with it."

"Randall Gage has nothing whatever to do with my staying at home," said Polly hotly. "And I wish, Aunt Retta—" She paused and made a strong effort at self-control. "And I wish, Aunt Retta," she finished, "that you and Aunt Nell would let me do it." And Polly turned toward Aunt Nelly with a pleading look that was utterly foreign to those dark, sharp eyes.

Aunt Nell, from her side of the room, was looking searchingly at her niece.

"We shall be quite all right here," she said quickly, with her usual sure intuition. "We shall arrange to have Jennie come in for an extra day, and if—if one of us should not be well, we can always keep her over night. You must not give up college for us on *any* account, Polly."

"I think I would rather not go away," said Polly, throwing back her head, with a little stiff determined gesture that reminded Aunt Nell of Debby when she had faced hard decisions, "not—just now. Next year I shall be eighteen, and that is a better age for college."

Then she turned abruptly and walked toward the door, the kitten still in her arms. Before she reached

it, however, Miss Henrietta spoke in an oddly altered voice.

"Come here, Polly," said Aunt Retta.

Polly stopped, and looked back at Aunt Retta in surprise. Miss Henrietta had put her knitting down beside her, and was getting up a little uncertainly from her chair. Both Polly and Aunt Nell sprang to help her, but Miss Henrietta raised her hand, as if to hold them away. Then, as Polly stood before her—

"You are a real Stebbins," said Aunt Retta. "I am proud of you." And suddenly, with a mouth that trembled, she leaned forward and kissed Polly on the cheek.

It was, perhaps, the first moment of real emotion that had ever passed between these two, both so averse to any show of sentiment. Polly turned again, without a word, and went as quickly as she could from the room, shutting the door upon what was both oddly sweet and intolerable. The sight of those trembling lips on Aunt Retta's face—Aunt Retta's!—was not to be borne. Emotion was terribly upsetting, thought Polly. It tired one so. Never had there been so much in one day in the Stebbins mansion. It just did not pay, and she was not going to let herself feel another emotion for a long time. But in this Polly was very much mistaken!

Well, it was settled anyhow, she said to herself,

as she went along the hall with the kitten, and she was glad, in spite of the dreary ache that she felt within her. Now all that she had to do was to tell Randall when he came back that they should not see each other this year at Sanbornville. Randall would understand, as he always did, in his jolly, matter-of-fact way. Then all at once she remembered how he had looked on that never-to-be-forgotten morning in the woods when she had first told him that she might give up college. She saw his face again as he had turned to her then, with something in his eyes that had startled her. Would it be like that this time, or had he already engaged the other girl for the laboratory? As she went slowly downstairs with the kitten there was, in spite of the uncertainty and disappointment, an odd sense of peace in Polly's heart. For the first time in weeks everything seemed clear and fair, with straight sailing ahead. And though she must give up so much if she were to stay at home, at least she would not have to give up the kittens. She put her cheek against the soft fur in her arms and opened the shed door.

At once, from every side in the dusk, her little friends came scampering to meet her. Polly sat down on the floor, while they crowded around, arching their small backs and rubbing their little purring selves against her hands and knees. Cats were a comfort, thought Polly, soothed in spite of herself by their gentle, unemotional affection. Zab had once

said something about her being rather like a cat herself, except that she did not purr often enough! Zab—think of his spurning her help, and going off with that foolish Ethel Daggett, holding hands—*her* Zabbie! Polly smiled. She was beginning already to feel more like herself than she had felt for weeks, a jolly, free feeling of having dropped a burden. To-morrow, the first thing in the morning, she would go over to Zab's, and tell him that, since they were both going to be at home this next year, they could use the money to enlarge the cat business and he might perhaps find time to be a real partner. Aunt Retta could be managed and maybe they could even get Ethel to help! Polly grinned widely as she thought of this. Then she got up briskly from the floor, and pushing the kittens away, slipped through the shed door. It must be time to help Aunt Nelly with the supper.

But Aunt Nell was not in the kitchen, although the fragrance of tea biscuit came from the oven, and a jar of quince jam was set out on the table. How Randall had loved the quince jam the night that he had come to supper, and how disapproving Aunt Retta had looked when Polly had insisted that he should finish up all that was left in the dish! But she must forget Randall now as fast as possible. In spite of that morning in the woods and the postal card, Polly felt in her heart that he was not likely to remember *her,* once he was back at Sanbornville

among the real college girls—and the one that was to help him. Well, what if he didn't? There were plenty of things left in life. Nevertheless it was a sober Polly who again opened the door and went swiftly into the front hall.

. But with the knob still in her hand, Polly was suddenly brought up short by what she saw before her. For the screen of the front door was partly ajar, and standing in the opening was a strange and lovely little girl, hardly more than a baby with fair flying hair and dainty white frock. She was peering with questioning eyes, into the dim hall, but as soon as she saw Polly she smiled and stepped, a little shyly, inside the screen.

"I'm Nelly 'Tebby Annerson," said the child, with surprising distinctness for one so small. "I think you're my Aunt Polly, and I like you."

Then Polly, spell-bound for a moment, was conscious of another figure at the screen door and, looking up, ran forward with a glad cry.

For it was Debby!



Chapter Seventeen

POLLY CAN DO IT

"POLLYKINS!" cried Debby, holding her sister at arm's length, and looking at her with the brown eyes that Polly remembered so well. "Why didn't somebody tell me how nice you are! Why, you're *lovely!*"

"And you," laughed Polly, her own eyes on the charming face under the brown traveling hat, "you're —you're just the same."

"But Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell?" said Debby, suddenly sober. "Tell me quickly—are they better? Is everything all right?"

"Why—yes," said Polly, surprised at these breathless questions. "Except that Aunt Retta was in bed for a while after she fell and hurt her hip again. You see—she broke it last winter."

"Oh *Polly!*" cried Debby, aghast, "How dreadful! *Why* didn't you write?"

"Aunt Retta wouldn't let me," said Polly; then added reassuringly. "She is up and around, and comes downstairs every day."

"Where are they now?" said Debby, all impatience. "Shall we go to them right away?"

"They're in Aunt Retta's room," said Polly. "Come on."

With little Eleanor between them, they went as fast as they could up the long flight. But Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell, forewarned by the voices which they had heard below, had hurried, startled and bewildered, into the upper hall. They stood there now, white with astonishment, gazing down the stairway.

"But why, *why* didn't I know about all this?" said Debby, looking with troubled eyes at the crutches, when the first greetings over, she stood with one hand in Aunt Nelly's, the other on Aunt Retta's shoulder.

"It is of no consequence now," said Aunt Retta, in a voice still trembling from the shock of sudden relief and joy. But, as she spoke, her eyes were not on Debby, but on little Eleanor, who, close beside her mother, looked soberly up at this awe-inspiring new relative. "She *is* a Stebbins!" declared Aunt Retta, in triumph.

"Yes," said Aunt Nell, holding out her hand to little Eleanor and smiling. And little Eleanor smiled back and put her hand into Aunt Nelly's at once, as children always did.

"But where is Eric?" said Polly. It was so wonderful to have Debby that Debby's husband had been for the moment forgotten.

"I came alone, with Eleanor," said Debby. "Eric

cannot get away from Rome until after Christmas."

"But what brought *you?*" cried Polly. "Oh dear, I have so many questions that I don't know where to begin!"

"Let us go downstairs to the drawing-room," said Aunt Retta, collecting herself, and turning in her usual positive way toward the stairs. "Then Deborah can tell us the whole story."

Five minutes later they were all seated together, Debby on the sofa between Polly and Aunt Nell, little Eleanor on Aunt Nelly's lap, Aunt Retta directly opposite in the big Sheraton chair. How stately and beautiful she looked, thought Debby, and how exactly the same everything was—Great-grandmother in her frame, the old secretary, the porcelains, the tapestries—all except the crutches. Debby could not bear to look at those.

"Why did you let all this time go by without writing, Deborah?" said Miss Henrietta. "We have been very anxious." But although she spoke coolly, Aunt Retta's face, into which more than her usual color had come back, belied her voice.

"Indeed, I am sorry, Aunt Retta," said Debby. "We did not mean to worry you, but you see our plans have been all upset again." As she spoke, her eyes turned quickly from Aunt Retta to Aunt Nell, then to Polly, as if she must make them all understand. "You see, we had another letter from the Museum," she continued, "suggesting that it might be better for

Eric to come back in January, instead of in the spring, and we were waiting to be sure before writing you, for we did not want you to be disappointed again, when the strangest thing happened. There had been such a nice professor and his wife in the pension with us—Americans—who had left their two boys at home, and were off on a sort of second honeymoon. He teaches art in some college, so we found we had things in common, and we saw a good deal of them. Then one day she came to me with a letter, which she had just received from her mother-in-law, and which she said had amused them so much that she just must read it to me. It seemed her two small boys had been in an escapade, as usual. She had said right along that they were a pair of imps, and altogether too much for their grandmother, with whom she had left them, so somebody had come in several times a week to look after them—a jolly sort of girl, whom the twins quite adored."

"What!" said Polly, turning upon Debby, whose eyes were full of their old sparkle.

"Well," continued Debby, laughing and ignoring Polly, "it seems that the twins had set their hearts upon seeing a good deal of this idol of theirs when she came next year to the college town where they lived, but one day they found out that she was not going to college after all, and somehow got the idea into their ridiculous heads that it was because she was afraid the president of the college might not like her!

So what did they do but run away after dark, and start on a thirty mile walk, for the sole purpose of telling the president of the college that their adored Pol——"

"Debby!" cried Polly, seizing her sister's arm. "Did you really meet the Gages? I should think you were making it all up except that of course it's true!"

"Yes," said Debby, "wasn't it amazing? It sounds like a plot out of a book."

"It is an odd coincidence," said Miss Henrietta, a trifle impatiently, "although I cannot see that all this has anything to do with your coming home, Deborah."

"But it has, Aunt Retta," said Debby, her face sobering. "Because Mrs. Gage's letter went on to say, quite casually, that the twins had got things mixed, and that the real reason their Polly was not going to college was that her aunts were unwell, and she could not leave them alone. Of course we were terribly upset about all this," Debby went on, "for you had let us know nothing about any ill health. Eric and I sat up half the night, talking about what we should do. One thing was clear from the start—I *must* go home to see how things were and to make sure that Pollykins did not give up college. So it was decided that Eleanor and I take the next steamer and that Eric come as soon as he can. We did not cable because we wanted to surprise you. So here we are—and that's all." And Debby gave both Aunt Nelly

and Polly a simultaneous squeeze, in her own impulsive way.

What a tangled web it was, thought Polly, sitting there, as in a dream, with Debby's arm about her. If she had not tried to help Zabbie she would not have collected cats, and if she had not collected cats she might not have met Randall, and if she had not met Randall she would not have known the twins, and if she had not known the twins they would never have gone on the nocturnal adventure which, in a roundabout way, had brought Debby back.

"I suppose, if I do go to college," laughed Polly, "it will be because of those two precious rascals, though they never were able to tell their president how nice I really am!"

"There is no 'if' about it," said Debby with decision. "Eleanor and I are going to stay right here at the Stebbins mansion, while Pollykins goes off to make herself famous."

"We could have managed by ourselves," said Aunt Retta, her head very erect, "but it will be a help and comfort to have you, Deborah." And nobody but the three who heard these words could possibly have known what a concession they implied.

"If Polly had only written how things were," said Debby, "we should have planned this long ago."

"Polly is too much of a Stebbins not to carry on without complaint," observed Miss Henrietta, a touch of pride in her voice.

At these unexpected words, Polly, her brows drawn together, looked across at Aunt Retta in despair. But she *was* a Stebbins, and she could not sail under false colors.

"I did write," she said at once, in a low voice, "but —the letter was destroyed—accidentally."

Aunt Retta regarded Polly in uncomprehending surprise, but before she could open her lips again Aunt Nell spoke.

"Polly always carries on," she said quietly. "And she has told us today, what we have known all summer, that she would not go away while we needed her. Polly has never failed us."

For almost the first time in her life Polly felt a dreadful lump in her throat, and rose hastily from the sofa. But the subject of the letter was not to be pursued, for at that moment little Eleanor, who had slid from Aunt Nelly's lap, and had been tip-toeing about, examining all the strange new things, turned suddenly, and walked over to Aunt Retta.

"Your room is very nice," she said, with quaint distinctness, standing in front of the Sheraton chair. "I like it."

And then Aunt Retta did an astonishing thing. She leaned forward and lifted little Eleanor into her lap, with a gesture of complete possession.

"She will stay with me," said Miss Henrietta, her hand on the child's fair head, "while Polly shows Debby to her room."

"But first I must see Jennie," said Debby, jumping up gaily. "Come, Pollykins, let's go exploring." And, slipping her arm through her sister's, she carried her off down the hall.

They looked for a moment through the door of the little workshop. "How small it is, and dim!" said Debby, fresh from her sunny Italian studio. Then they went on into the big kitchen, where Jennie, overwhelmed, was waiting at the table.

"Now you must see the Famous Cats," said Polly, when Jennie had been left to wipe her eyes on the roller towel, and leading the way through the back hall, she opened the door to the shed.

"Why, Polly, how wonderful," cried Debby, standing in the midst of the whirl of kittens. "Wherever did you get so many beauties?"

"Just wait until you see Miss Pickett's," said Polly, peering about in the already dusky shed for her prize pussies. "Oh, there you are, one of you," she cried, looking up at a low beam, where a small gray bunch was huddled in the shadows, mewing piteously.

Pulling the big table under the beam, Polly jumped up on it. The kitten, however, in the perverse way of its kind, drew back from the rescuing hand, and Polly, her face turned from Debby, had just succeeded at last in getting her hand on it, when the outer door of the shed opened, and there, silhouetted against the light, stood Randall Gage.

"Hello," he said, as if they had met only yesterday,

and as if he had fully expected to find Polly up on a table. "The front of the house looked as if you had company, so I thought I'd try my luck around here. You don't mind, do you?"

"No," said Polly, continuing to stand on the table, with the kitten in her arms, "of course not." Then, half turning, "Oh, I want you to meet my sister."

But Debby was gone, vanished through the other door, in that moment when Polly had forgotten everything but Randall, forgotten even Debby—*Debby!*

"When did you get back?" she said a little stiffly.

"Oh, an hour or two ago," said Randall, in a careless voice, walking across the shad. "The twins said that you wanted to see me as soon as I arrived, so here I am."

"They did?" exclaimed Polly. "Well, I never told them anything of the sort."

"You mean you don't want to?" observed Randall. It was too dark to see his eyes, but Polly knew exactly the amused expression that was there.

"No," said Polly promptly. Then as Randall raised his brows. "I mean I don't want *not* to see you—I mean—oh, you crazy thing, *of course* I'm glad to see you!" And she grinned down at him in a way that left no doubt.

"Did you say your sister was here?" he asked, grinning back.

"Yes," said Polly. "Isn't it grand? She came this

afternoon, to stay for the whole winter. And what is more, she has met your brother and his wife in Rome!"

"Oh, really?" said Randall, in his most uninterested voice. "So then I suppose you'll be going to college after all," he added, dismissing his relatives.

Did he care whether she went or not? Why should he have asked her like that unless he did?

"Yes, I suppose so," said Polly, trying to make her own voice uninterested also. But she was quite unprepared for his next remark.

"Then what the deuce are you going to do with all these howling cats?" said Randall, looking around the shed, where many little kitten voices were talking about supper.

"I'm thinking," said Polly, with a funny twist at the corners of her mouth, "of trying to pass them over to Zab for the winter. I think he might take them on if he could have Ethel for a partner!"

"What, that little——" began Randall.

"Yes," said Polly, "exactly."

They looked into each other's eyes and laughed. My, but it was fun to be with somebody again who always caught the point before you had finished!

"What about coming down where a fellow can see what you look like?" suggested Randall.

"All right," said Polly, passing him the kitten.

Then he held out his hand, and to her own astonishment, Polly, who had never in her life been known

to accept masculine assistance, put her own into it and jumped lightly down from the table.

"You look very nice," said Randall, regarding her with something in his eyes that reminded her faintly of that summer morning in the woods.

She turned quickly away.

"Now you must come and meet my sister," she said, walking toward the door. But just before she opened it, Randall stepped forward and put his hand upon the knob.

"What about the laboratory?" he said, looking squarely at Polly.

"Haven't you filled the place?" she replied, looking squarely back at him.

"You *bet* I haven't," he said, with astonishing vigor, "not if I can have *you*."

And Polly knew at that moment that she should never doubt Randall again.

"Of course you can," she said and smiled, and felt all at once that she was being dreadfully sentimental. But more than that—and worse—she knew that she did not care!

Then they went together to find Debby.



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